

## **WHAT MAKES A GOOD THERAPY DOG?**

While volunteering as a therapy dog team is rewarding, is your dog appropriate for therapy dog work? What makes a good therapy dog? Here are some criteria when asking if your dog is suitable for therapy work:

- Therapy dogs must love people and human contact.
- Therapy dogs must be emotionally calm and at ease in all situations.
- Therapy dogs must be physically calm with good manners and an appropriate personality.
- Your dog should be a people loving pup, absolutely and completely.
- Your dog must be willing to voluntarily approach strangers, make eye contact with them and put forth an effort to get close to them.
- Tolerating a stranger is not the same as welcoming them.
- Therapy dogs should be comfortable with medical equipment (wheelchairs, walkers, rolling carts, etc.)

Your dog must have good manners. Your dog must be calm. A calm demeanor goes beyond good training. People that are physically compromised cannot handle a whipping, wagging tail, paws on their body or a dog leaning against them, forcing them to protect their face, shoulder or hip.

Your dog must have enough obedience training to be able to focus on you and your commands (sit, down, stay, leave it, etc.) while in a hectic, unpredictable environment. This is a safety issue. There may be food or pills on the floor that your dog must ignore. Your dog should be able to follow your commands to sit, down or stand while visiting a stranger. Your dog must be able to keep all 4 paws on the floor at all times. A swat of their paw could open up a wound that requires medical treatment.

Your dog must be a confident Zen master. Besides being physically calm, your dog needs to be emotionally calm. Essentially, a good therapy dog needs to behave in ways that most dogs don't: unfazed when a child hugs them a little too hard before you can intervene, unreactive when an Alzheimer's patient tries to grab their ears and screams when you step in the room, unfazed when a steel tray drops behind them, unreactive when a senior gets a death grip on the sides of the dog's head and kisses their lips before you can stop them. A reactive dog cannot be a therapy dog. People your dog visits will not be perfect, guaranteed. Therefore, your dog must be nearly bomb proof.

Your dog must be able to work alongside other therapy dogs with no issues. Many visits are group visits, where your dog is within 2-3 feet of other working dogs. Your dog must be able to ignore other dogs and concentrate on their task at hand.

What are your responsibilities as a handler?

- Be your dog's advocate.
- Be able to read your dog's body language.

- Be objective.
- Eliminate as much stress as you possibly can from the visit.
- Know your dog well enough to predict which environment to avoid.
- You must be proficient at reading your dog objectively and do so every minute of every interaction. You are your dog's only advocate.
- You must stay alert and watch for potentially inappropriate interactions and intervene to keep your dog safe.
- You must know where other dogs on the visit are in proximity to your dog. Handlers get distracted and another dog can invade your dog's space in a heartbeat.
- You need to become skilled at interpreting visual signals of discomfort in your dog and learn to act on them immediately.
- You are the responsible member of a team and you need to watch and evaluate the patient, the surroundings and your dog at all times.
- **YOU MUST SUPPORT YOUR DOG.**

Therapy dog work with your dog can be important and wonderful work-good for you, good for your dog and good for people desperate for the same glow you get when you cuddle with your dog at night. Sharing that joy is a beautiful thing, but it needs to be done with knowledge and foresight so that it's a win for everyone.