

Introduction to Therapy Dog Work



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Welcome to the wonderful, amazing, and magical world of Therapy Dogs!

Therapy dogs provide emotional comfort and support. Although a service dog can be a therapy dog, a therapy dog is not the same as a service dog. *Therapy dogs are **not** automatically allowed access* to all the places a service dog can enter. Although therapy dogs are usually trained and evaluated, and most times are registered for their work, they do not have the unique, individualized training of service dogs. Therapy dogs are trained to help others, while a service dog's training is intended to help a specific individual. Therapy dog teams are seen everywhere as the realization of their benefits to the community spreads. You can see dogs (and sometimes other animals) working in places such as hospitals, nursing homes, rehabilitation centers, counseling centers, schools and libraries. They each demonstrate calm, gentle behavior toward people and basic good manners in their homes and communities.

Therapy work is 99% on-leash work - there is very little off-leash interaction except in special situations. Handlers may trust their dog implicitly, but need to have the security of that leash available just in case something happens that may spook the animal. Your first priority is ALWAYS SAFETY!

Dogs are our link to paradise.
They don't know evil or
jealousy or discontent.
To sit with a dog on a hillside
on a glorious afternoon is to
be back in Eden,
where doing nothing was not
boring -- it was peace.
(Milan Kundera)

What is the difference between AAA and AAT? *(also known as AAA/T)*

Two terms you immediately need to know are **Animal-Assisted Activities (AAA)** and **Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT)**. There is a *very* big difference between them, and you need to make sure you are *offering only what you are **legally qualified** to do.*

People who work in both the fields of AAA and AAT must be versatile, flexible, and have strong skills in working with people and the therapy animal. AAT, however, requires training, skills, and usually a higher-level certification in their field (nursing, social work, teaching, occupational therapy, etc.).

People who wish to work in AAA do not provide medical therapy, so they likely do not need a certification or degree in a related field. Well-mannered dogs with friendly handlers, *trained in providing visitation services* such as comfort and listening skills, can be evaluated and registered as a professional therapy team, and then be able to provide team activities to help make huge differences in peoples' lives.

Therapy team managers carefully screen their teams to match skills and aptitude with clients. They also frequently provide training services to others who wish to get involved in this field. Some of the registration organizations provide not only basic AAA training (in person and/or online), but also offer other outside opportunities to learn new skills, improve education, and network with others in the field.

Therapy Dog - Reading Programs (not just for kids!)

Although not the only way to reach young children and teens, Reading Dog Programs are becoming more popular across the country. Administrators and therapists are beginning to see the benefits of having therapy teams present and working with these children, through allowing them to interact with and read to the dog, or by having the handler read to the child. Children who work with a therapy team have shown increased language and communication skills, as well as social skills. Many times, therapy teams can be a true blessing to special needs people, especially those whose needs are in communication, language, and reading skills. The animal provides a measure of comfort to the client, allowing the person to relax so they can more easily grasp and learn the skills they are trying to improve.

Therapy Dog – Health Care Programs

Research has proven many times over that interaction with a calm dog can boost spirits, encourage personal interaction such as petting and talking, help with interpersonal communication, and provide welcome stress relief - for patients, family members, and staff. Health Care Therapy Teams visit patients in hospitals and residential facilities, counseling and therapy offices, and even hospice units. Some teams also provide carefully-screened in-home visits to homebound and hospice patients. Visiting with the elderly can be especially rewarding as you provide quiet times where they can tell stories and share memories of their amazing lives. This is especially beneficial to those suffering from stroke, dementia or Alzheimer's disease.

People of any age can benefit from visiting with therapy teams after the loss of a beloved person (or pet) in their lives. Sometimes simply by being present, the team brings emotional comfort, helps the person to remember and cherish times they had, and begin to cope with their loss and move forward. If the person (or pet) that has passed is one that your team has been visiting for a while, the connection and your team's presence can be that much more meaningful, comforting, and beneficial.

The therapy team also provides an objective and non-judgmental ear to listen. Children, teens, and adults alike may be afraid to talk about what's bothering them for fear of rejection, or adding to other peoples' stress. Many people (especially children) will hide their worries because they are afraid they are the cause of a situation. The team encourages the person to talk about their worries and fears. Even adults need ways to cope with anger, fear, and anxiety. By sharing their feelings, they can learn to find ways to cope with life, and be reassured that they are not the root cause of a certain problem.

Therapy Dog – Other Programs

Incarceration presents a unique environment that is usually devoid of the positive interaction, kindness, and unconditional acceptance that we all crave as human beings. Depression, aggression, suicide and

My sunshine does not come from the skies...
it comes from the love in my dogs eyes.

(Anon.)

many other issues are frequent in prisons and correctional facilities – both juvenile and adult. In some therapy animal programs, teams visit offenders, sometimes offering the only outside interaction the person may have. Their non-judgmental understanding and support can bring a ray of hope to these frequently ignored and abandoned offenders.

In recent years, therapy programs have been created to send teams to help in traumatic events. Providing emotional support to both the disaster victims and the emergency personnel on site, they are commonly referred to as “**Grief Support Dogs.**” Sadly, they are as needed as much as many other therapy dogs, and can be seen at the site of school shootings, terrorist attacks, and natural disasters (floods, earthquakes, etc.) Being part of a grief support team takes a very special person and dog, with specific training, and a strong ability to be able to handle very traumatic situations calmly and professionally.

Getting Started in AAA

Begin by getting yourself and your dog *evaluated and registered* with one of the national therapy dog organizations. (See List below)

Be sure the program you choose offers several benefits, including:

- Offers (or verifies) standardized training for handlers in appropriate activity or therapy work
- Offers standardized skill/aptitude screening for animals and handlers as a team
- Assures that the skill/aptitude screening is performed by a professional therapy dog evaluator
- Requires a standardized dog health screening by a licensed veterinarians
- Offers primary liability insurance for the volunteer therapy team
- Offers ID tags, badges, or cards for therapy handlers and dogs
- Offers continuing education for skills through newsletters, email, website, etc.
- Has reasonable membership requirements and costs, including for renewals

Once you have your Therapy Dog Team registered, you can begin making a difference in the lives of others! You may prefer to just go alone and do your own thing, or you may join a therapy dog group (such as R.E.A.D., Pet Partners®, Tails for Tales, or others). ***It doesn't matter... just do it and have FUN!***

HELPFUL INFORMATION

Equipment / Necessities for Visits

Most certifying organizations require a bandanna or vest to be worn by the animal, although some **do** include this as part of the registration fee (while some others do not). Check the organization's guidelines for their requirements. Most registration organizations will also have a way for you to obtain the necessary items needed for therapy visits.

AAA Therapy Team Registration and Training Programs

- **Love On A Leash (LOAL)** [www.loveonaleash.org] - formerly The Foundation for Pet-Provided Therapy - offers training, evaluators, team registration, and program insurance.
- **Therapy Dogs International (TDI)** [www.tdi-dog.org] –offers training, evaluators, team registration, and program insurance
- **Therapy Dogs, Inc. (TDInc)** [www.therapydogs.com] – offers evaluators, team registration, and program insurance; no “official” training is offered, but has a tip sheet and copy of the test available online
- **Pet Partners®** [www.petpartners.org] - (formerly Delta Society) - offers training, evaluators, registration, and program insurance
- **Delta Society** also offers [Animal Evaluator and Volunteer Instructor courses](#) and licenses to broaden your education train you to provide comprehensive animal screening and instruction to other people.

Guidelines for AAA/AAT Therapy Dogs & Handlers

The Pet Partners® Guide Book is a terrific resource offering solid information for anyone wanting to build a good foundation in therapy dog work. It is available for \$25 from Delta Society at:

<http://prostores2.carrierzone.com/servlet/deltasocietycom/Detail?no=138>

DISCLAIMER AND GUIDELINES for Submission of Articles/Media to DSA

Don't forget to send in stories of your Therapy visits to share with others! As space permits, we will choose some to put into our bi-monthly newsletter, and we may share them on the website as well.

Please remember the following:

- **PRIVACY CONCERNS** - ALL client names need to be first name ONLY (or you may use initials such as J.P. or C.W. H.)
 - If you include pictures of the session (which we hope you will!) please identify yourself and the dog by name and the client(s) with initials or first names.
 - If you are able to use a photo editing program, please try to crop out unnecessary backgrounds, so the photo focuses on only the team and/or persons interacting with the animal (clients or staff). If not, you may send the original image and we will crop it if needed.
 - **REMEMBER...** If you must send images via regular postal mail (instead of email or upload), we will NOT return photos that are sent in, so please send a COPY - do not send the original if you want to keep it!
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*DSA wants to thank you for your ongoing support,
and we wish you a very prosperous career in therapy dog work.
Please let us know how you are doing!*