

I just got a puppy and we want to become a therapy team. Where do I start?

Begin Socialization

Puppies need a variety of experiences. Things to learn are riding in the car, visiting with all kinds of people and being in many different environments. Good suggestions are public parks, and pet stores. Allow them to meet people of different ages and ethnicities as well as individuals with beards, wearing uniforms, hats, and glasses.

Each new experience you share with your puppy should be pleasant and positive. As you are exposing your puppy to new people and places, be prepared and expect the unexpected because one negative experience can have a life-long impact on a dog. Don't overdo socialization experiences; be sure to stop while you and your puppy are still having a good time. It's better to have short, but frequent, positive experiences.

Consistent Handling

Therapy dogs need to be at ease with physical contact. Start by touching their body everywhere including feet, ears, tail, and mouth. Begin with soft and gentle touch and work up to slightly clumsy, but never painful, touch.

Also take time every day to establish comfort with grooming. Brush your puppy's hair and teeth, and touch, clip, or file your puppy's nails. Decide if you will be the person to give your dog a bath or if you will have a professional groomer do these tasks. If you plan to use a groomer, be sure and introduce your puppy to the groomer and equipment at an early age.

Develop a Trusting Relationship

Find things that make you and your dog joyful. In experiencing different things together you will discover what it is that makes you both happy. Take walks, hikes, play in the park, or visit the beach. If the experience is less than desirable for your dog, take steps to improve the situation or shorten its duration. As a therapy team, your dog will count on you to support them while visiting. By taking that role seriously for your puppy, they will come to trust that you consistently make decisions in their best interest.

Start Training

Basic obedience is necessary. Attending puppy classes is a good place to start. You need to consider the methodology that the training center and trainer uses when you select a program. Positive reinforcement and force-free methods for training contribute to a trusting relationship. Learning to read your animal's body language is critical for a therapy dog handler. Can you identify the subtle cues your dog gives you when they are unsure of a situation? Do you know how to respond to support your dog?

Determine Aptitude and Interest

There isn't a formula for determining if a puppy is going to be a good therapy dog. Your dog should enjoy spending time with people, and not just their owner or family, but people they haven't met previously. Their strong bond with their owner translates into a trust that you will keep them safe, so they can be more tolerant or forgiving of clumsy interactions or surprising distractions. They enjoy providing comfort to others and seek out interactions.

Ultimately, it is your responsibility as your dog's best advocate to ensure that they truly enjoy - not merely tolerate - therapy interactions. A dog with strong obedience skills may be able to perform some therapy animal tasks, but if they are enduring the interactions because they feel they must follow your direction, that may ultimately erode the trusting relationship with your animal. It is up to every dog owner to make choices in their animal's best interests, including whether therapy work is the right choice.