

## MAKING SAFE AND HAPPY VISITS—A GUIDE FOR YOUR TDV EVALUATIONS

*This document summarizes some of the most important safety and visitation advice that your evaluator covered during your first evaluation. Please feel free to refer to it as you go through the evaluation process; by your last evaluation, your evaluator will expect you to be able to conduct professional and safe visits on your own per the instructions and guidelines.*

*Attached to this quick guide are a few articles we think you may find helpful. They are part of a larger library of such articles about therapy dog work; this library is free and easy to access and we encourage all handlers to visit it often. To access the library, please go to: [www.therapydogs.org](http://www.therapydogs.org). Click on [Library](#), and then click on [Articles](#)*

**[PLEASE ALSO MAKE SURE THAT YOU KNOW THE ALL TDV POLICIES AND GUIDELINES!!](#)**

### **Working with Your Dog—Safe and Happy Visits**

Making therapy dog visits can be a wonderful experience. For the most part, therapy dog work is fun and rewarding—but please don't forget that safety is always the top priority and there are things that you should be aware of...

- Even though your dog has been tested by us and may be perfect at home—remember that the dog is a different species with different perception and communication. A dog can't say, "Oh my, that large breathing pump under the bed scares me, Mom, or this person is patting me too roughly and it hurts"—a dog under stress or in a new situation may behave differently than expected. Your dog may shut down and not want to visit, it may tire more easily than playing at home. Any dog can show signs of withdrawal and even aggression/fear if pushed beyond its comfort level. You as the handler need to observe the dog's reactions and intervene before it gets to that. Remember too that a dog who is not feeling well or is injured may also act differently.
- Your job as handler is to ensure a safe and happy experience for dog and patient—and to adhere to all TDV policies and guidelines when you are doing so (the policies and guidelines were in your certification packet—or ask your evaluator where you can find a copy on [www.therapydogs.org](http://www.therapydogs.org)).
- A good handler is aware of the dog and is the dog's "protector"—keeping or getting your dog out of dangerous or stressful situations.
- Your dog might be more stressed or excited on first visit or at a new facility— new environment, smells, noises, other dogs present – this means you may have to be even more diligent in your handling skills. Also, give your dog praise and encouragement during visits.
- Manage your dog's stress on visits: Take potty breaks, provide a short time-out, praise your dog, end the visit before your dog is tired or disinterested, and provide fun play time before and after visits.
- You must be VERY aware of surroundings—your dog, person you're visiting, others around you, the environment. Being AWARE and keeping your DOG CLOSE to you can help you prevent lots of dangerous situations.

### ***Keeping your Dog Safe in a Facility***

- Observe the needs of your dog—your dog sets the pace, how long you visit, and when you take breaks.
- Watch the floor. There may be needles, pills, blood or feces that your dog could ingest.
- Watch for collar grabbing, nose tweaking, wheelchair rolling on dog or bumping her—be right there with your dog. (Some people like to latch on to the dog's collars. Before a patient does this, redirect their hands down the dog's back).
- Some people can be rough, angry—stay close to your dog, stay aware. Be prepared to leave a situation you or your dog doesn't like.

- Remember to think about the type of equipment or collars (or even costumes) your dog is wearing—what are the safety risks of each?

### **Keeping People Safe in a Facility**

- Your dog should be “four on the floor”—no jumping up on person or bed, no pawing (some patients are frail and may have brittle bones and sensitive skin, injuries and/or medical equipment under blankets)
- No licking wounds or face—keep licking to minimum and only if patient asks
- Wash hands if you have patient interaction—there is often antiseptic foam on walls
- Watch IV tubes and medical equipment, don’t let yourself or your dog get tangled in them
- Understand what rooms you cannot go in— isolation rooms, etc. Your evaluator told you how to identify these rooms in the facility you are doing your evaluations in.
- Never give food or beverage to patients, even if they ask. Likewise, never move or reposition a patient or their medical equipment. Find a nurse for any of these types of requests.

### **Etiquette and Other tips**

- Keep your dog in heel and on leash—close to you at all times. Dog should not be ahead of you—in other words, your dog should not greet or make a visit at the end of the leash with you far behind at the other end.
- Stay out of way of nurses and medical staff.
- Don’t allow your dog to sniff people who are asleep and don’t let dog run up to people. Always ask if the person wants visit—most will be able to tell you clearly. If uncertain, approach slowly and with respect, reading the person. If in doubt, pass or ask a nurse.
- Conversation helpers:
  - Hi! Would you like a visit from a Therapy Dog?
  - Guess who I brought to see you?
  - Talk about the past (Are you from this area? Did you have any pets growing up? Did you ever play any sports? What did you do for work?).
  - Talk about the present (What’s your favorite TV show? What do you think of the weather? Do you have any hobbies? What’s your favorite food? What type of music do you like?)
  - Look around the room—you may find lots of interesting conversation starters!
- Very important—working around other dog teams:
  - Your dogs should be in “work mode”—not sniffing at each other, romping, or playing. Remember too that not all dogs enjoy being repeatedly sniffed and licked by other dogs and it can be distracting to all involved.
  - Keep distance from other teams
  - Never allow more than one dog to visit a person at same time (this can cause jealousy between the two dogs, and is distracting and disrespectful to other teams). Likewise, your dog should not approach or sniff another dog who is working with a patient.
  - If you are working with other dogs, please allow them to greet briefly (quick, controlled greetings are often best) outside the facility before you all go into “work mode” and go into the facility to make visits.

# Be There, Be Aware: The TDV Team Safety Mantra

Ask Isa . . .



## Ask Isa

—Isa Helfrich, German Shepherd & therapy dog  
(typed by Deb Helfrich, Training & Testing Officer)

### Question:

How do I avoid all those safety hazards when making visits?

### Answer:

Remember the TDV safety mantra: Be THERE, be AWARE!

When I work with new therapy dog teams, the emphasis is on SAFETY during visits. Handlers have a tremendous responsibility—keeping their dogs, and everyone their dog interacts with, from harm WHILE providing an amazing opportunity to brighten someone's day.

Don't let your dog ingest something harmful. Don't let your dog get tangled in medical equipment. Don't let your dog jump up on, or paw, anyone. Watch your dog's reactions and behavior. Watch that the patient doesn't grab your dog's collar, or worse. Watch out for wheelchairs rolling on dog toes. Watch, watch, listen, see...the list of safety hazards can be daunting.

And, then we tell you, relax and enjoy your visit?!?!? But, what it boils down to is being proactive and aware.

You can avoid pretty much any hazard on a visit by *staying close* to your dog (being RIGHT THERE as your dog makes visits--not out at the end of the leash, four feet away) and being AWARE of your surroundings (scan the floor for pills, look at the patient's bed for tubes, watch where your dog's mouth and feet are...).

So, remember for safety: **BE THERE AND BE AWARE!!!!!!**

The "Ask Isa" column appears in the Therapy Dogs of Vermont newsletter —reproduced here for TDV website readers. It is not meant as a substitute for seeking proper veterinary, training, or behavioral advice from professionals!



# At the Door, a Mental Checklist



—Isa Helfrich, German Shepherd therapy dog (& Deb Helfrich, Vice President)

It can be tough for new teams to remember everything they need to before they enter a room for a visit with a patient or resident. Sometimes it's nerve-wracking enough to make new visits when you're just starting out, let alone trying to remember the many policies in place for safe, happy visits.

So, here's a quick checklist for the most important things you should be aware of when you're standing in that doorway about to ask a person if they'd like a visit with your therapy dog.

☑ **C-CHECK PRECAUTIONS** the patient may have—with nurses/staff or look for signs on the door. Are there any isolation, no visitation, caution, or stop/precaution signs anywhere on the door jam, or outside the door near the patient's room? Likewise, is there any other information outside the door about the patient that you may find helpful

to your visit (such as if the person is hard of hearing or unable to communicate?). Do this EVERY time, as the status of a patient's health may change between visits. Also, looking for a person's name can make your introduction a bit more personal.

☑ **H—SCAN** at the room for anything potentially **HARMFUL** to you and your dog. Look for unsafe items that your dog may step on or ingest (pills on the floor, cookies on a table, tubes, wires, etc.). Look for space where you could position your dog comfortably (for example, a tight space between a bed and medical divide, with a curtain on your dog's back, may not be to your dog's comfort). Notice room activity.

☑ **A—ASK** if the person would like a visit. Introduce yourself and your dog. Identify yourselves as therapy dog team from TDV. Always respect the wishes of someone who doesn't want a visit.

☑ **R—RECHECK** resident/patient and the room. Look for bandages, wounds, tubes, medical equipment— anything that your dog could interfere with or get tangled in.

☑ **T—THANK** the person for spending the time with you and your dog.

If you ever have any questions about anything related to making safe visits, please do not hesitate to email Deb or Isa at [admin@therapydogs.org](mailto:admin@therapydogs.org) or your member support officers at [membersupport@therapydogs.org](mailto:membersupport@therapydogs.org).

*Here's to safe and happy visiting!*



## BEFORE EACH VISIT, REMEMBER **CHART**:

- **C**heck precautions
- **H**armful?
- **A**sk
- **R**echeck
- **T**hank!

# Is It Enough to Have a Great Dog?

Ask Isa . . .



## Ask Isa

—Isa Helfrich, German Shepherd & therapy dog  
(typed by Deb Helfrich, Training & Testing Officer)

### Question:

Becoming a Therapy Dog Team: Is It Enough to Have a Great Dog?

### Answer:

The short answer to that?

**Nope!**

Successful, effective, positive, safe therapy dog visits are not just about having a sweet impeccably-mannered dog at the end of your leash.

The HANDLER is a critical factor to the successful team equation—and not just because he or she drives the dog to the visits and carries the poop bags and water!

It's the TEAM working together that matters. As the leader of the team, handlers must be able to:

- Understand and apply the many TDV policies and guidelines when making visits
- Know their dog's signals and body language
- Be completely aware of the surroundings to make sure everyone is safe and comfortable—dog, patient, and staff.
- Know the facility's rules and work within the facility harmoniously with medical personnel and other staff
- Be good with people—respectful, friendly, professional, and compassionate

TDV is also looking for members who want to be a part of the TDV community and who support our mutual cause to spread canine magic in our community. This involves being responsive to TDV's membership requirements—such as keeping up with vaccinations, letting TDV know where you are visiting so that we can keep our records current, keeping your membership current with annual renewals. It also means supporting the organization in any way they can (by at least making therapy dog visits and ideally by volunteering time in service of organizational needs, and spreading the word about TDV's mission).

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