

Is the Dog Having Fun?



Ask Isa

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

I often get questions if all therapy dogs must be overly friendly, exuberant about visits, tail wagging and dying to be in every patient's presence (think your typical outgoing, people-oriented Golden Retriever). The short answer to this complex question (we must see the dog in action in order to understand if it has the desire and temperament for making therapy dog visits) is that no, not all dogs have to have that bubbly, people-are-my-life personality. Some dogs are a bit more quiet, or have less exuberant personalities. Some older dogs are simply more calm. Like people, dogs have different personalities and many are still suitable for therapy dog visits. In fact, some people appreciate a less enthusiastic dog!

However, this brings us to the point of this article—we must assess if the **DOG** enjoys making therapy dog visits. So, everyone in the visit is having a grand old time ... the patient, the staff, the handler. But, is the **DOG HAVING FUN?** Are we looking at a dog that is...

- **NOT SOCIAL**—standoffish, preferring to be apart from the action of the visit, not wanting to approach people on her own, or perhaps consistently wanting to leave? These dogs may not be suited for therapy dog work because being around people outside of their family is simply not their thing, not something they *enjoy*. However, some dogs are just a little more stoic than your gotta-love-everyone Golden and may have a different visitation style. Also, dogs who are normally social may disengage when they don't feel well, are having an off day, or simply have done enough visiting for the day!
- **SHY**—this dog seem to like people and want to make visits but may lack confidence. We'd have to evaluate how serious the shyness is, how the handler handles it (force is never okay), and if the shyness is getting better with every visit. The shy dog sometimes just needs more time—time to be socialized, to be engaged in training that builds confidence, to gain trust in the handler, or simply to mature.
- **SCARED**—this dog is consistently afraid of people and environments. Sometimes a dog with minor fear at a test will blossom during the evaluation visits, or sometimes this dog will fall apart in a visitation setting. Question if the dog really wants to do this work. And, if you have a handler who is not noticing that the dog is frightened or is noticing but disregarding the dog's needs, that's a red flag.

Not only is the dog's needs important here, but consider the patient's feelings...what he or she may feel or think when a shy, antisocial, or frightened dog comes to visit. If the handler has to make excuses for the dog "oh, he's just scared of X", or "he takes a while to warm up..." ...hmmm?

It's not an exact science when determining whether or not to certify dogs who show these types of personality traits. But, they may be a very strong indicator that the dog is an unwilling participant in a voluntary activity that should be enjoyable for ALL—including our four legged friends.

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!

