

Become a Therapy Dog!

So, your puppy wants to...



PREPARING YOUR PUP FOR THERAPY DOG WORK

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

So, you're thinking about therapy dog work with your pup? It's a mighty fine way to volunteer in the service of others and spend some really neat time with your dog. Even though Therapy Dogs of Vermont doesn't certify therapy dogs until they are a year old, it's never too early start preparing!

Therapy dogs must have outstanding temperaments, solid obedience skills, excellent manners, and be free from dog and people aggression. If you want to explore the guidelines and the testing criteria in more detail, you can find more information at www.therapydogs.org.

Early experiences can go a long way in building a solid, confident, well-behaved, sensible adult dog. Here's Isa's ingredients (besides lots of hotdogs, ice cream, some burger, maybe a steak or two...mmm) for the making of a good therapy dog:

- **Out on the Town.** Expose your pup to a plethora (ppplltheeeetora...love that word!) of sounds, smells, people, and places. Meet people with funny costumes, screechy children, balloons, wheelchairs, police sirens, etc. This exposes pups to experiences they won't necessarily get at home (well, maybe police and people in funny costumes IS a regular thing at your house, but that's a topic for another column). Show your pup that the world is a wonderful, safe, friendly place.
- **Dog-to-Dog Manners.** Socialize your dog with dogs too! Teach them that there's a time for play (wahooo!) and a time for obedience around other dogs. Encourage manners when greeting—such as no barking or lunging.
- **Start obedience early.** This can be easy and fun! Intersperse play with basic commands. Work obedience into your day as part of the norm. Focus on fun in the early stages—obedience is about building a relationship, learning to communicate—not on perfect heels and sits. Instill in your pup a love of working with you—a foundation for any type of work and more advanced training. When I do something that makes my human happy, she throws my ball, makes fun noises, and dances around with me (Note to self—tape fun silly human antics for America's funniest videos. Buy lots of hotdogs with prize money)--this makes me happy and I want to do more to make her happy; it's a wonderful upward spiral!
- **A helpful hint:** Get your pup used to nail clipping and bathing (as working TDs must be clean and have short nails).

Every puppy matures in its own time and has its own unique personality, so how much you expose her to and how fast will depend on her. If you need help, seek out a trusted trainer or behaviorist.

SOME EXTRA BENEFITS...

- Your pup will learn to have manners no matter where she is—not just at home!
- Varied experiences can really enrich your pup's relationship with **you**—spending time together, exploring the world, and gaining increased trust in not only the world but in the human sharing it with her.
- You'll be surprised how quickly your pup will calmly accept new experiences and catch on to more advanced obedience training.
- Increased confidence. Your pup will build a foundation of trust and confidence so ideally, that when something scary or different does come along, it's hopefully not that BIG a deal.



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