

Service Dogs - by Jake Guell

8/2015

Pet therapy dogs come in all shapes and sizes, bringing support to people in different types of environments.

Therapy dogs can help individuals both emotionally and physiologically by providing emotional support in the form of attention and affection. Many call it unconditional love.

They can be found roaming the halls of nursing homes and hospitals, stopping room to room to cheer up each individual's day. They can be found in schools and libraries, providing nonjudgmental support to children. Therapy dogs can be essential in times of crises after traumatic events. Crisis therapy dogs travel all over the country to areas of natural disaster or catastrophic occurrences. These dogs help many people with the healing process.

Therapy dogs play an important role in our society, but should never be mistaken for service dogs. Service dogs provide a service to specific individuals in need. These services help individuals get through the day by assisting them with specific tasks and emotional support as well. Service dogs are the only dogs that are allowed in just about any public or private establishment. Therapy dogs are not allowed the same rights as service dogs.

With the demand for these types of supportive dogs on the rise, many people wonder if their own dog would make a great therapy dog. Not all dogs are suitable for this job.

The right dog comes with a natural ability, coupled with many hours of training. Therapy dogs have to demonstrate adeptness at obedience skills, maintaining a proper aptitude and the ability to adapt to changing environments.

Therapy dogs need to be able to handle visual distractions, such as staggering, gesturing, direct eye contact, flailing arms, flashing lights, quick-moving objects, medical equipment, uniforms and costumes. These are all things many therapy dogs encounter while providing pet therapy.

They also need to remain steady and calm through audible distractions in the form of crashing carts, angry yelling, high-pitched screaming, sirens, medical equipment, sloppy speech, dropped objects and loud banging.

Therapy dogs will be exposed to many types of touch. From children to the elderly, with or without disabilities, they all touch therapy dogs in different ways. It may come in the form of sloppy petting, pulling of ears, pulling of hair, pulling of the tail and tugging on the paws.

Yes, these are all inappropriate ways to pet a dog, but often these are situations pet therapy dogs face.

Therapy dogs will face all types of environments. Many facilities keep their buildings very warm, and some therapy dogs are required to offer support in extreme environments. Through it all, they need to be able to hold certain positions and show a general interest in people.

Therapy dogs are still dogs. They enjoy what they do and understand the types of things they will encounter along the way. They learn all these things through training and experience.

Pet therapy is a great way for you and your dog to give back to the community. If you would like to learn more about pet therapy, speak with a therapy dog organization or your veterinarian.

If you are unsure if your dog has what it takes to be a therapy dog, contact a certified professional dog trainer to assess your dog's behavior before testing with an organization.

Founder of Tails for Life - Jake Guell, CPDT studied human psychology at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, a graduate of Animal Behavior College, a Registered AKC Canine Good Citizen Evaluator, a member of the Association of Professional Dog Trainers and certified through the Certification Council of Professional Dog Trainers (CPDT). He has eight years of dedicated canine training experience including therapy dog training, service dog training, canine sport training, clicker training, advanced obedience training, trick training and he specializes in behavior modification. He has trained high profile service dogs including one sponsored/endorsed by actor Charlie Sheen. His extracurricular activities include visiting hospitals with his therapy dog Onyx and competing with Onyx in Dock dogs.