

Therapy Animals

by Joanne Yates, 4Paws President

Animals can have a profound effect on people at almost any stage in life—from teaching kindness to a child to eliciting a quiet hello from a senior-care resident who has been silent for years. That is why dogs, specifically therapy dogs, can be found today in health care facilities, schools and libraries across the nation.

Until the 1970’s the majority of dogs in the US were considered mere pets or working farm animals and their therapeutic value as social, sentient beings was largely ignored. Then researchers began collecting anecdotal evidence and scientists devised studies to document a long list of healthful benefits that derived from human/canine interaction.

Therapy dogs belong to individuals who go to classes for evaluation and training. Therapy dogs are not considered “service” or “assistance” canines that are specially trained to serve a person with disabilities.* Instead, therapy dogs visit others, offer unconditional love, an affectionate nuzzle and the occasional kiss to show appreciation.

These activities may not sound therapeutic, but the results of such visits can be complex and long-lasting, especially with children. A number of schools and libraries use therapy dogs to promote literacy. Therapy dogs in children’s oncology units bring a moment of calm and hope to these young patients undergoing chemotherapy, radiation or surgery.

Children who have been abused, are bullied or who are marginalized because of ethnic, racial or physical differences find strength and solace in the warm furry body that visits them and sees only a person worthy of love. Children with autism or have attention disorders can find ways to associate with others, to control their impulses and become more integrated into classroom activities.

Even the most severely developmentally disabled students in special education classes can explore their world in ways that only a dog can provide them.

What makes this possible is a fascinating study of the human/animal relationship, and the focus of another article. However, if you have a dog that loves people and is accepting and tolerant of children’s antics or adores being with adults, you may have a good candidate for a therapy dog. As the handler, you need a few hours per month to visit a site that is appropriate for your dog and that suits your interests.



To pursue therapy dog training, contact the local animal shelter as many offer therapy dog trainings and evaluations. National groups such as Delta Society or International Therapy Dogs, Inc., have with satellite programs throughout the US. Their information is readily available on the web.

In northern California, there are several active groups that also offer trainings and evaluations:

4Paws Wellness and Learning Center, 707-861-0235

ARF Pet Hug Pack, pethugpack @ arf.net

Assistance Dog Institute (Bergen University of Canine Studies), www.bergenU.edu

East Bay SPCA PALS (Pets and Love Shared), pals @ eastbayspca.org

LAPS (Loving Animals Providing Smiles), LAPS_AAT @sbcglobal.net

Lend a Heart, www.lendaheart.org

Marin Humane Society SHARE, www.marinhumanesociety.org

PALS (Paws As Loving Support) pawsaslovingsupport.org

Paws for Healing, www.pawsforhealing.org

San Francisco SPCA, www.sfspca.org/programs-services/animal-assisted-therapy

Fees for training and evaluations vary from \$25 to \$250 or more. Shop around to find a group that fits your needs, budget and style. Do you like to act as your own agent? Or do you want more support or local contacts? Do you want to work with children? With elders? In hospitals? How many hours a month do you have to visit? Are you willing to carefully groom your dog (or have it groomed) so it is clean and safe for visiting?

Also make sure whatever program you choose, you are covered by the organization's liability insurance. If they offer no insurance coverage, you are liable for any injury or harm your canine might do, even if it is provoked (someone teases or threatens your dog) or unintentional (a dog's claw accidentally scratches a patient).

** Guide dogs for the blind are universally known for helping their owners navigate a world they cannot see. Hearing or signal dogs, assistance dogs, seizure dogs, dogs to support people with PTSD or crippling depression, or dogs that sense an impending heart attack are among a growing list of service dogs that are protected under the American Disabilities Act and are allowed to accompany their human companion at all times. ADA does not provide the same rights to therapy dogs and this is an important distinction to understand and honor.*