

# Obedience and Your Therapy Animal

by Connie Sharkey and Kathy Klotz

People often say to us, “I have a new puppy (or a new adoptee) and I want it to be a therapy dog. What do I have to do?”

There is no guarantee that your dog will *want* to be a therapy dog—that is, have the innate desire to engage with people outside his own pack, enjoy the activities and cope with the potential stresses associated with patient/clients in various settings. We urge you to consider your dog’s needs and preferences in this regard. Still, there are many things you can do to maximize the chances that your dog will have excellent potential as a visiting companion.

## First Things First: How Important is Training?

Long before you consider making an investment in time and education for therapy visits, raise your pup to be a well-behaved companion in *all* of your family and household activities. Ask yourself some questions about the relationship you and your dog will have in “regular” life: What do you want your dog’s role to be? How active or sedentary is your lifestyle? Where will you want your dog to accompany you—around town doing errands in the car? To your workplace? On long walks or camping and hiking adventures? What will you want your dog to do in each and every setting?

As a pack animal, your dog is hard-wired to want to know where s/he fits in, what you expect and what his/her job is going to be. Dogs are extremely flexible and adaptable—no other species on our planet has proven so malleable as the dog, which now has more than 400 distinct breeds. So, no matter what your ultimate goals, the first essential is to TRAIN. Training is much more than specific commands—it includes clear and consistent communication about your boundaries, rules, preferences and expectations. In other words, *building your relationship* and teaching *appropriate skills* for the life you and your dog will lead together. **Training is simply the greatest gift you can give your dog**, so that you can be proud to include her in your life, which is where she wants to be. She will love that far more than fashion accessories, a fluffy dog bed or a giant yard.

## The Basics for Every Dog

You and your dog will go a long way, either in everyday life or in therapy volunteering, with the basics: **sit, down, stay, come, and walking on a loose lead**. And there are multiple philosophies out there about how to achieve these skills. If you and your dog have never taken an obedience class together, consider doing it now. It is never too late. Ideally, start with a puppy kindergarten class. Read some books and watch trainers on TV. There are many excellent books and training shows available.

## Skills YOU Need to Train Effectively

Guess what? YOU need to have some skills in order to train your dog—skills that make it easy for your dog to understand what you want.

**Be the Leader.** This is the basis for everything else. All dogs want to know who’s in charge, and they respond well to demonstrated leadership. Many professional trainers say that lack of leadership accounts for most problems people have with their dogs. When dogs do not see a strong leader, they assume they must try to step up and take that role! Being the leader doesn’t mean being a yelling dictator—it means being confident, calm, clear and authoritative. One easy way to do this: do not ask, beg or cajole your dog for what you want—tell him. Not only with your voice, but also with your attitude and body posture.

**Be Interesting!** Be more interesting and exciting to your dog than anything else in the immediate environment. Be animated, use different tones of voice and pacing, use your dog’s favorite motivators, like food or toys (see “Right Equipment,” below), so that she will want to focus on you and what you’re asking.

**A Bunch of C Words: Communication, Consistency, Clarity.** How do you *communicate* with your animal so that it understands what you are attempting to teach it? Be *crisp* and *clear*, and don’t keep repeating yourself. When you say the command again, again, and again, you are only conveying that you

really don't expect the behavior until you have asked many times, and you will both end up frustrated.

Be *consistent* with your commands and body language. If you ask for a sit by saying the word "sit" and showing the dog what "sit" means with food, and then rewarding the dog when its rear hits the ground, you have made progress toward teaching your dog to sit. However, if you use several different words, or say the same word several times, or fail to let your dog know when it has achieved your desire, then once again you wind up frustrated and your dog is unhappy because it knows it hasn't pleased you, but it's not sure why.

**Right Equipment.** Appropriate equipment can make all the difference in training an animal. Start with a collar and a leash. Harnesses may be useful or desirable after your dog knows what you want, but they make it much harder to communicate to your dog what you are attempting to teach it. In therapy work you cannot use choke chains, any collar made of metal, or prong/pinch collars, so don't become dependent on those if therapy visiting is your goal. Use a good nylon or leather buckle collar or a head collar for extra control, and a 5-6' leash. Use a different collar for training than the one used for going for walks or playing. Dogs pick up on this really fast and know when it's time for work. You'll also need a motivator—anything that causes your dog to understand that you are happy with what he has done. Use food (small bits of whatever your dog most loves) or a favorite toy. The motivator is used to entice your dog into the desired position and then to reward it for achieving that position.

**Timing.** When I tell my dog to sit, I show my dog, by making it lift its head, that I want its bottom to hit the ground. Then I immediately give it praise just as its bottom hits the ground. In this way, I have timed my positive reinforcement so that it has meaning to my dog, and he knows he has done what I wanted.

**Giving Corrections.** It is also important to know how and when to use correction. A correction is not punishment or pain, it is the level of compulsion necessary to get your dog's attention. The amount of compulsion needed may increase as the level of distraction increases. But as with positive reinforcement, a correction must be given *instantly*, not two or five minutes later. Use a consistent word, sound or hand signal. "No" is most obvious but not necessarily most effective. Try a cheerful "uh-uh" or "oops."

**Take Baby Steps and Build Slowly.** For each new skill you begin to train, remember *baby steps*. Letting your dog know what behavior you want is your biggest challenge. Get your dog to do the desired behavior, then "name it and claim it." Stay focused, and if you or your partner are having a bad day, stop and try again later. During the day, you can always throw in random requests for a come, sit, down, etc. as you go about your daily activities.

**Keep Training Sessions Short and Frequent.** One of our favorite bits of training advice is to train three or four times a day, but only 5-10 minutes each session. That way it's fun for both of you—your dog never gets tired or bored, and you really can't claim that you have no time to train your dog!

**Train in Many Different Environments.** If you only request a sit in the kitchen, your dog won't necessarily respond out in the backyard. Get them accustomed to the sights, sounds, smells, surfaces and distractions of different environments, as well as to all kinds and sizes of people.

## **Important Skills to Teach Your Dog for Therapy Visiting**

Your success in therapy volunteering will pivot on your *relationship* with your dog and your *skills* as a team. Once you master the methods, you will be amazed how easily your dog can learn, and how much fun he will have learning new skills and pleasing you.

The ideal therapy dog is calm, friendly, easily controllable, and predictable, and has a demeanor that inspires confidence in others. To visit clients effectively and successfully, you will need to provide a companion who can walk with you on a loose lead and respond to your requests. You will need to have a trusting relationship and be highly attuned to one another. When your dog trusts you and responds to your requests, you can both be confident and comfortable in various visit environments.

In therapy work, mastering the basic commands is essential for several reasons, no matter the size or personality of your dog, or the length of his legs. First, they will show that your dog can be calm, respon-

sive and controllable, in all situations; next, they will be a good indicator of the relationship and bond between the two of you; and, not least, your clients will be delighted when they can ask your dog to do any of those things and get a positive response.

Unlike formal competition obedience, we suggest softer tones and smaller, more subtle signals, and—very importantly—you may constantly offer your dog guidance, reassurance and support.

### **Additional Skills Useful in Therapy Settings**

Teach your dog to **wave** or offer a **high-five**. Your clients will love it and ask for it every time!

Another useful skill is for your dog to **sit politely by your side** until you let him know he may move forward to meet a new person. This will give you time to make sure a visit is welcome from the person you are approaching. Or, in the case of a child, you have time to ask a parent if a visit will be appreciated.

A **leave it** (use whatever words you prefer) is extremely valuable because you don't want your dog floor-surfing for leftover food, or even pills, that are often present in care facilities.

Beyond these, almost anything your dog knows how to do can be incorporated into a visiting setting. For example, one little dog we know loves to dance on his hind legs. He likes to accompany patients with walkers. When normally they may struggle to accomplish a goal of six feet or ten feet, if Tippy accompanies them, they enjoy watching his dancing so much that they may walk 12 feet or 20 feet without even noticing, because they don't want the fun to end.

### **Reap the Rewards**

If your dog loves to interact with humans beyond his own pack, and has learned the basic commands, volunteering as a visiting therapy team may be just the ticket for you both. When you get out your visit bag and uniform and your dog starts getting excited to go, you will know that your dog is eagerly anticipating his "job" and you can both look forward to satisfying and rewarding adventures in therapy work.