

# Why Does ITA Require Dogs to be 2 Years Old?

**A**s you are probably aware, the minimum age for most therapy animal registries in the U.S. is one year old.

Several years ago, ITA elected to move our minimum starting age for dogs from one year to 18 months. But when we started hearing that Europeans had begun requiring therapy dogs to be at least two years old, we wanted to find out why and how they had arrived at this decision.

Research on dog brains has expanded rapidly in the last few years. But much of what you will find when exploring the internet is sponsored by pet food companies, trainers, and those who hope to explain puppy growth stages to owners who want to understand them more thoroughly. Still, the general consensus is that ***a dog's brain will be fully developed at around two years old.*** This is about physiology, not just obvious social or emotional maturity (or lack of it). Animal-assisted interactions are inherently stressful, and we do not want to add a steady diet of stress to a dog's life when they may not be fully ready to handle it. Because each dog is an individual and there is no way for us to measure whether their brain has finished developing, we think it is better to err on the side of caution.

We wanted to understand this trend a bit more scientifically, if possible, so our Advisory Board vet, Katie Domann, DVM, consulted with the American Veterinary Medicine Association (AVMA), who in turn brought the question to a researcher named Karen Overall, considered a brilliant animal behaviorist, who some of you may have heard of. Here are the relevant elements of her response:

This is really a question about social maturity, when brain neurochemistry becomes less labile, and what this means for predictability of behavior.

“Social maturity” is a period of upheaval leading to either improvement in cognition and decision making or behavioral pathology (which may or may not have been previously incubating).

For this reason it's no accident that people begin to see that dogs change or may be less reliable in training or trained signals starting at around 10-12 months as they enter this phase. Just watching behaviors, there appear to be early and late emergers. We know that between 18-24 months most dogs will settle into a more reliable, consistent pattern or responsiveness, after a less reliable period.

Of course, for dogs where it goes wrong, people really notice it by 18-24 months.

There are no imaging and few behavioral studies, but the behavioral studies have all been on service dogs. In one group of dogs (for humans lacking sight) who failed testing at 18 months, success was possible at 24 months for most of them if they went through 'retraining' (which was really sending them back with younger dogs and just letting them grow up). Another study from Guide Dogs UK identified behavioral markers of early distractability and also found that trained behaviors became more reliable between 18 and 24 months with predictability about success being virtually 100% by 24 months.

So—my sense is—this is why the Europeans have gone to 2 years—it's simply mentally better for the dog.

Karen L. Overall, MA, VMD, PhD, DACVB  
Editor-in-Chief, Journal of Veterinary Behavior: Clinical Applications and Research  
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/journal/journal-of-veterinary-behavior>

Thus, no matter how hard we have worked to build our dogs' skills and relationships, we have no control over the rate at which their brains are developing. And that development

(Continued next page)



## 2 Years Old (cont.)

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varies a lot by breed and by individual.

We all have known about, if not experienced, a dog who seems to turn into somebody entirely different during a “teenage” spell! This is really entirely normal, and we’re probably lucky that more of us don’t experience some kind of wayward (if temporary) changes in our dogs when they reach that 18-24 month phase.

It’s also important to point out that ITA has chosen to embrace and promote the guidelines of the international organizations that are at the forefront of research in our endeavor: IAHAIO (International Association of Human-Animal Interaction Organizations) and AASI (Animal-Assisted Services International). They both, in turn, ground the practice of animal-assisted services in the One Welfare concept (also known as One Health), which asserts that the welfare and well-being of humans, animals, and the environment are interconnected. One Welfare posits that human, animal and environmental health cannot be separated from the well-being and welfare of any species. One example of this is the link between animal abuse and human and community violence.

Failure to safeguard an animal’s welfare during animal-assisted services, by ignoring or being unresponsive to an animal’s signs and signals of distress, may result in harm to the animal, negative messages given to the client, and even harm to the client (biting, scratching, or even simply pulling away from the interaction).

At a minimum, the welfare of therapy animals should be consistent with the Five Freedoms,

which means that animals participating in AAIs should experience freedom 1) from hunger and thirst, 2) from discomfort, 3) from pain, injury or disease, 4) from fear and distress, and 5) to express normal and natural behavior. The Five Freedoms are a minimum baseline for animal welfare, but true well-being should include positive states—not just absence of negative states.

Before, during and after each session, handlers are responsible for continuously assessing the internal and external conditions that may impact their animal’s state of being.

At ITA, we have chosen to express all of this in our mission, Enhancing quality of life through the power of the human-animal bond, which we mean to include both humans and animals, and also in this expression of our philosophy:

**Healing through animal-assisted services is not worthwhile if it is done at the expense of the animals.**

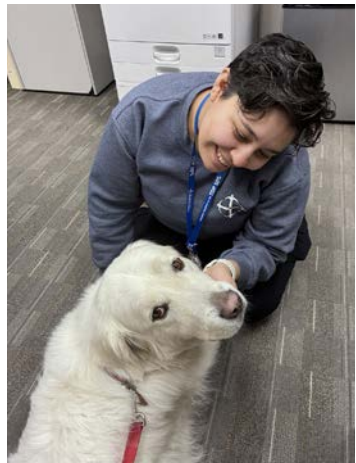
These ideas underlie all of our actions. So, again, our decision to not accept a dog for therapy work until they are at least two years of age is to make sure we do not hamper a dog’s life by introducing the recurring stresses of therapy visits before they are optimally capable of handling them.

Our ITA model now goes way beyond dog obedience and behavior to include the handler’s support for their animal partner and management of each situation that arises. We expect each handler to always protect and continually enhance the relationship they share with their partner.

— Kathy Klotz



# REPORTS FROM THE FIELD



## A Staffer Chronicles a Daisy (partner of Erika Daines) Visit

Hello ITA!

I just wanted to forward on some fun pictures of Daisy's visit to Northern Utah Rehabilitation. Staff, patients, and visitors all love all of our pet therapy visits, so thank you for what you do!

– Stephanie Jolley, OTR/L  
Director of Therapy  
Northern Utah Rehabilitation Hospital  
Ogden, Utah

## “Kevin’s a Magnet!”

ITA team Eileen Ambrose & Kevin also volunteer with Higher Ground Veterans and Adaptive Sports Programs when they're in Sun Valley. The group below is the Wildland Firefighters, with Higher Ground staff and volunteers, grinning at their chance to pose with Kevin. He is the perpetual magnet for all the various groups that participate.



# A New ITA Member Representative on our Board

**ED. NOTE:** For the last several years, we have had three ITA members—Eileen Ambrose, Carol Prince and Beth Wolfer—serving as “Member Representatives” on our ITA Board of Directors. That title means someone who does not have fiscal responsibility for the organization, and does not vote, but participates principally to gain a member perspective on how our Board of Directors is functioning for the organization. Carol recently retired, and Beth decided to become a “regular” ITA board member, leaving only Eileen in the role. We are pleased to introduce and welcome Janice Pinterics, who has joined Eileen as a member rep as of February 1, 2026.



Hello ITA Team Members!

I’m Janice (aka JP), and I’ve been volunteering as a team with Yuki for about 4 years now. I adopted her in 2021—she was 2 at the time and was rescued from a kill shelter in Texas. She’s a mix of Boxer, Australian Cattle Dog, Labrador,

and Pit Bull. We volunteer at a domestic abuse shelter, South Valley Services.

I got the calling to become a team when I was taking care of my mom with in-home hospice care. Yuki has always loved people, and seeing her interact with my mom at the end of her life convinced me she was a natural. She brings so much love and joy to the children we visit at South Valley who have faced hardships many of us cannot imagine. Many of them tell me about their dogs and cats that they had to leave behind. I’m sure you’ve all experienced the challenge in holding back tears when you’re faced with these situations.

This year I will hit a milestone decade (60!!) and I want to do something more personally meaningful at this stage of life. So, I’ve decided to leave my role at my company and, hopefully, contribute more to ITA! As many of you, I’ve fallen in love with the mission and all that our animals do to make people’s lives better. I reached out to Kathy and expressed my interest in offering more support. I got really excited and jumped at the offer to



become a Member Representative on the ITA Board. My chief role in this capacity is

to attend monthly board of directors meetings and then write an article like this to tell you all what I learned about how ITA is functioning behind the scenes.

I attended my first monthly Board meeting on Tuesday, February 10th. I was pleasantly surprised by the experience. The ITA Board of Directors consists of some amazing members; some of them have decades of experience with the organization.

Nonprofit boards of directors, as you may know, are not paid. Their main responsibilities are to make sure the organization operates legally and ethically (to maintain their nonprofit tax status) and to help secure funding.

My first meeting had some really exciting topics. It seems a primary objective currently is to increase funding significantly so that we can become an even more effective organization.

As I think you’ve all seen, the ITA staff is AMAZING! But it’s a very small group of people (5) who have an incredibly long list of tasks and countless teams to manage, and we need to increase their numbers by at least 2. We are planning to do more fundraising events and drive more improvements. We’d also love to teach the community and potential donors that our therapeutic impact extends beyond the “warm fuzzies.” We looked at some other similar organizations that have significantly higher income, and we know that we can match or exceed their numbers!

I left the meeting feeling excited about all the potential that ITA has, and even more excited about all the wonderful like-minded souls. I will be reporting on our progress each month!

- JP

# Dogs in Poetry

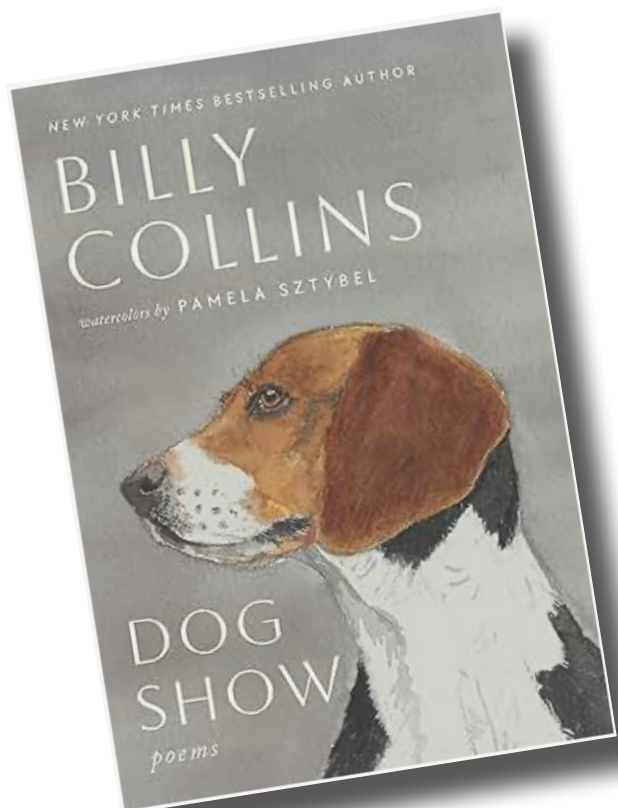
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## A DOG ON HIS MASTER

As young as I look,  
I am growing older faster than he,  
seven to one  
is the ratio they tend to say.

Whatever the number,  
I will pass him one day  
and take the lead  
the way I do on our walks in the woods.

And if this ever manages  
to cross his mind,  
it would be the sweetest  
shadow I have ever cast on snow or grass.



## DOGYEARS

Today I turned  
420 in dog years,  
so I have decided to take myself  
for a long walk on the path around the lake,

and when I get back home,  
I will jump up on my chest,  
lick my nose, ears, and eyelids  
while yelling at myself to get down.

And I will replenish my bowl  
with cold water from the tap  
and hand myself a biscuit from the jar  
and accept it gingerly with my teeth.

Then I will make three circles  
and lie down under my desk  
and fall asleep there  
with my chin resting on my paws.

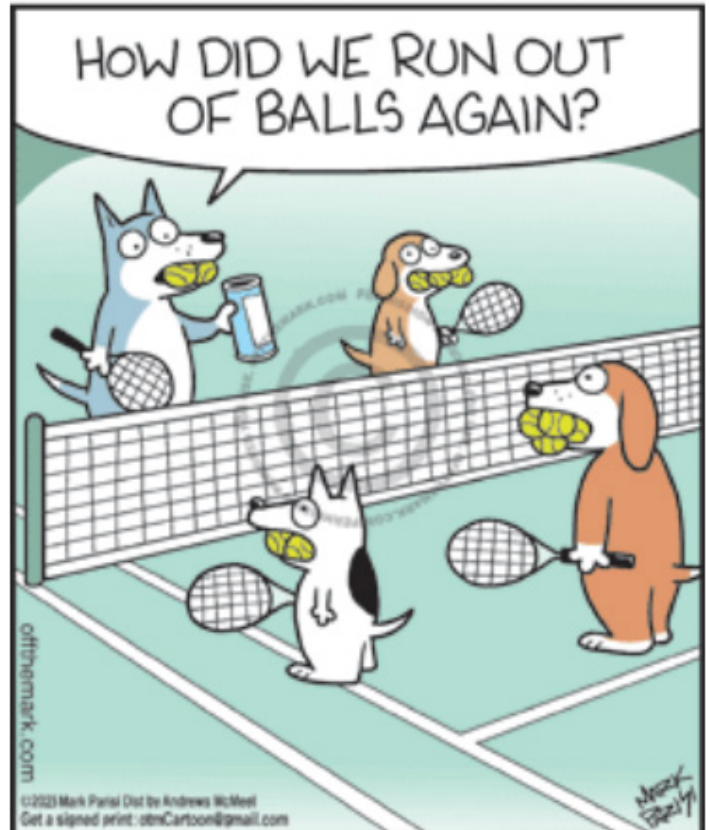
And as I type away all morning,  
I will reach down now and then  
to stroke my furry, venerable head,  
and to make sure I haven't run away.



# The Lighter Side



off the mark.com by Mark Parisi



FIDO BONA ESQ  
Pawfirm Owner

**Did your human  
break a treat in half  
and try to pass it off  
as a whole treat?**

**You may be entitled  
to compensation.**

Our attorneys have seven times  
the experience chasing down  
treats owed.  
Paw us today to schedule a  
consultation

**HOUND,  
WOLFE  
& CHASE**

Attorneys at Paw

