

Visiting Dog Strategy's For Assisted Living Communities

In assisted living and memory care communities, loneliness, anxiety, and social withdrawal are more common than many families realize. But research shows that something simple and deeply comforting can make a meaningful difference—calm, well-trained therapy dogs.

Studies on animal-assisted therapy have found that positive interactions with dogs may help lower stress hormones, increase feelings of connection and calm, reduce agitation in some individuals living with Alzheimer's disease, and encourage more social engagement. Even short, supervised visits can brighten mood, spark conversation, and create moments of joy that families and caregivers often notice right away.

But it's important to remember that not every dog is suited for this role. The right temperament, proper training, and a safe environment are essential to creating a positive experience for both residents and animals.

“Organizations like the National Institutes of Health have highlighted measurable improvements in mood and emotional well-being during even short visits.”

“And caregivers often notice the difference right away, more eye contact, more conversation... even moments of recognition.”



“But it has to be the right dog and the right environment. Safety and training matter.”

EVIDENCE-BASED CHECKLIST

- Evaluated through programs like Pet Partners or the American Kennel Club Canine Good Citizen test
- Calm, predictable temperament (not easily startled)
- Comfortable around walkers, wheelchairs, and sudden movements
- No history of aggression or high anxiety
- Fully vaccinated, clean, and well-groomed
- Responds consistently to basic commands
- Always handled by a trained adult
- Visits are supervised and aligned with community guidelines

Theresa's Tips for Visiting Dogs in Assisted Living Facilities

Our dog is a very unusual pup. He was the calmest one in the litter and always had a special “chill vibe” about him. We were able to teach him obedience commands quickly, and his visits are truly looked forward to by the residents at my mom’s assisted living community.

Here are some of the things we trained him to do, and one important note: most dogs respond very well to treats. We went through many, many bags of them!

- Master basic obedience commands.

Your dog should reliably respond to sit, stay, down, and come. Consistent control is essential—especially around residents who may be unsteady on their feet. Even a friendly jump can pose a safety risk.

- Keep your dog leashed at all times.

A leash ensures you can quickly guide or redirect your dog in unfamiliar or sensitive situations.

- Desensitize your dog to unexpected noises.

Practice dropping objects or creating mild, sudden sounds near your dog and observe their reaction. The goal is a calm, unbothered response to unfamiliar noises.

- Encourage calm, gentle greetings.

Train your dog to approach people slowly and avoid jumping or pawing. A relaxed, friendly demeanor helps residents feel comfortable and safe.

- Get your dog accustomed to mobility equipment.
- Introduce your dog to wheelchairs, walkers, and canes so they remain calm and confident around these common sights in assisted living environments.

Disclaimer

This guide is for informational and educational purposes only and is based on general research related to animal-assisted therapy. It is not intended as medical, behavioral, or legal advice. Outcomes may vary by individual, health condition, facility policies, and the temperament and training of the animal. Always consult the community, healthcare professionals, and qualified therapy animal organizations before arranging visits or introducing animals into senior care settings.