

## **When Ending a Therapy Dog Visit Is the Right Choice**

Adapted from Jim Thebarger and Alliance of Therapy Dogs

Therapy dog visits are incredibly meaningful. A few minutes with a gentle dog can bring a smile to someone's face, ease loneliness, spark a treasured memory, or simply provide a moment of connection.

But sometimes, the kindest thing we can do for the people we serve—and for our canine partners—is **end the visit**.

As therapy dog handlers, we have a responsibility to advocate for our dogs. That means paying attention not only to what our dogs are doing, but also to what is happening around them. Our dogs may be willing to tolerate an interaction without actually enjoying it. Remaining still, quiet, or obedient does not necessarily mean a dog is comfortable.

### **We Don't Have to Wait for a Stress Response from the Dog**

Imagine a resident reaching toward your dog. Your dog willingly approaches, but the person begins patting the dog's head hard enough to make his ears bounce. The resident is smiling. Your dog hasn't pulled away.

Do you intervene? **Yes.**

You might gently say, “Let me show you how he likes to be petted,” and demonstrate a slow, gentle stroke along the shoulder with an open hand.

Teaching appropriate interaction is part of our responsibility as handlers. Someone can have the best intentions and still need guidance. A person may genuinely believe they are showing affection while unintentionally making the dog uncomfortable.

Canines for Christ, Alliance of Therapy Dogs, Pet Partners and many other therapy dog organizations emphasize the importance of appropriate interactions and handler awareness when working with therapy animals

Sometimes the simplest intervention is also the most important: **“Please stop. That's too rough for him.”** We don't have to wait for a flinch, or escape attempt before we protect our dog.

### **Not Everyone Understands Gentle Handling**

A visitor may laugh and say, “Dogs love me. He doesn't mind,” while continuing to rub a dog's head vigorously after being asked to be gentler. That is when the handler needs to make the decision for the dog. Move the dog away. Create space. If necessary, end the interaction.

Perhaps a resident occasionally grips tightly and cannot easily release their hold. Repeatedly saying, “Be gentle,” may not solve the problem. Instead, the handler and facility staff can plan ahead and modify the visit so the person can still benefit from the dog's presence without creating an unsafe situation. Maybe the dog rests nearby while the resident talks about the farm dog she once had. Perhaps she remembers how that dog followed her to the mailbox.

**Connection does not always require touch.** Sometimes the most meaningful part of a therapy dog visit is simply being together or providing a ministry of presence.

### **Children Need Guidance**

Children can be especially excited to see a therapy dog. A child may rush very quickly forward with open arms, wanting to hug the dog. Before those arms reach around the dog's neck, the handler can create some space by stepping in front and redirect the interaction: “Let's wait and then gently pet his shoulder.”

The child's parent or caregiver can help reinforce the demonstration. A safer alternative may be standing beside the dog or offering gentle petting with appropriate supervision.

Again, the goal isn't to discourage interaction. **It's to make the interaction safer and more comfortable for everyone.**

### **One Dog. Many Hands. Too Much?**

Sometimes the challenge isn't one person's interaction—it's several people reaching for the dog at the same time. Someone reaches from behind. Another person reaches over the dog's head. Someone else grabs the bandana for a photograph.

The handler may need to step in and say: **“Please let go and step back. We'll have one person at a time.”**

If necessary, ask staff to help organize turns. And if the environment cannot be managed safely, leave.

There is no requirement that a therapy dog remain in an interaction simply because people are excited to see them.

### **Ending the Visit Isn't a Failure**

This is one of the most important things a therapy dog handler can learn:

**Ending a visit is not a failure. It's good handling.** We don't have to wait until our dog is visibly distressed before deciding it is time to leave. Maybe the environment has become louder. Maybe the room has become crowded. Maybe your dog has been working for a long time.

Maybe there are simply too many people wanting to interact at once. Maybe your dog is beginning to show subtle signs that they need a break.

We can say:

**“We're going to take a little break.”**

We can move to a quieter area. We can step away and take a quiet walk.

We can let our dog rest beside us.

And sometimes, the right choice is simply:

**“We're done for today.”**

### **Prepare Your Dog for a Safe Exit**

A comfortable departure should be something we practice before we ever need it.

Teach your dog that moving away with you is a positive experience. Practice leaving distractions, stepping away from people, and returning to a quiet space.

Preparation should be gentle and rewarding—not painful training in endurance.

If something frightening or painful happens during a visit, end the visit. Assess your dog, seek veterinary care if injury is suspected, and follow the Canines for Christ's reporting procedures.

### **Our Dogs Trust Us to Speak for Them**

At the end of a visit, imagine your dog lifting their nose toward the cool air outside, walking beside you with a loose leash.

Maybe you had hoped to visit one more room. Maybe someone was disappointed that they didn't get a turn. Maybe you worried that saying “no” would seem unfriendly.

But your dog trusted you to recognize when enough was enough.

Our therapy dogs give so much to the people they visit. They bring comfort, joy, memories, laughter, and connection.

**They deserve the same consideration in return.**

Being a good therapy-dog handler isn't about completing the most visits, allowing the most interactions, or making everyone happy. It's about creating safe, positive experiences for both the people we serve **and the dog serving alongside us.**