

TEAMING WITH YOUR DOG

Have you ever noticed on therapy visits how some handlers and their dogs appear to work effortlessly as a team and seem to read each other's minds, while others have more difficulty and seem to struggle? What makes a great therapy team?

A great therapy team is a true partnership between the handler and the dog. They need to know each other intimately, respect each other, read each other, and work together seamlessly as a true team. Your relationship with your dog is perhaps the most important factor in your success as a therapy team and must be built on a foundation of mutual trust.

How do we earn our dog's trust? Gaining our dog's trust is a process that begins well before we start doing therapy work. Developing trust happens in the little day-to-day things we do with and for our dogs – Things such as being consistent in our training commands so our dog knows what is expected from him; providing ongoing training with positive reinforcement; providing predictable structure in our dog's life; playing regularly with our dog in order to build a strong bond; letting our dog sometimes sniff to their heart's content on walks; giving our dog enough exercise (sometimes walks just aren't enough); paying attention to our dog's signs of stress and promptly alleviating that stress; gently and gradually expanding their world through ongoing socialization; teaching new tricks to our dog in order to enrich his mind; giving our dog soothing massages in all the favorite places; scratching where he likes it best; being fully present and attentive to our dog; and simply enjoying our dog. We need to behave predictably and be consistent with our dog, so our dog knows he can depend on us to reliably meet his needs.

How can we more effectively team with our dog during therapy visits? We must continually advocate for our dog. Visiting is hard work and can be stressful for our dog, and we need to respect our dog's preferences and sensitivities. This involves being careful not to overwork our dog. It's so natural to feel enthusiastic about this ministry and schedule all the visits we possibly can in order to reach more people for Jesus. Doing visits makes us feel good, but even if your dog loves people, he can get burned out from doing too many visits and then decide he's had enough of therapy work forever.

Another way to advocate for your dog is to be mindful of your dog's preferences as to where you visit. Don't force your dog to visit in environments where he is uncomfortable. This is where you have to sublimate your own ego and desires, and honor your dog's preferences. You may, for example, enjoy visiting children in schools, but if your dog is not comfortable around children, those visits will be ineffective. Some dogs thrive in a setting where they are surrounded by a group of people all petting them at once; other dogs do better with one-on-one visits, such as hospice. Know and respect your dog.

Learn to trust your dog while he interacts with those you visit. Realize the visit is not about you; it's about the participant's interaction with your dog. The person you're visiting will

remember your dog for weeks to come, but might forget you. This is how it should be! So step out of the way and let your dog do what he does best, which is loving on the person in front of you. Sometimes that's all that is needed for healing to take place – sometimes you don't have to say much at all, but just hold a sacred silence with the person.

Another way to advocate for your dog is to remain aware of your dog at all times on visits. Know how to both protect and maintain control of your dog. A major means of protecting your dog is to use training to control your dog, to see trouble coming and avoid it. Always be attentive to your dog, and be vigilant and aware of your surroundings for potential dangers to your dog or to the participant. Your dog doesn't understand the hazards, nor do the people. Only a skilled handler can manage the dog to keep everyone safe. Be a *proactive* handler, rather than a *reactive* one. Anticipate your dog's behaviors and direct your dog according to what is about to happen, not after a behavior has already occurred. Dogs are more comfortable when their handlers behave proactively.

Always be attuned to what your dog is doing right! Reward desired behaviors, and be sure to give your dog a reward that he *likes*, not one that is inadvertently punishing, such as a top-of-the-head pat. Redirect inappropriate behavior, and do everything you can to help your dog succeed in its tasks.

Respect your dog's sensitivities. Know how to read your dog's signals and behavioral patterns, and respond when your dog is trying to communicate to you. Become well-versed in reading dog body language. Prioritize your dog's physical and emotional wellbeing. Never assume the quality of your dog's experience. That is, never assume you know what he wants or feels. Never just assume your dog enjoys the work, or that the participant likes dogs, or even that you know all you need to know about handling your dog. Look at your dog objectively and honestly, and truthfully consider whether your dog truly enjoys what you are asking him to do.

We all know why this ministry is so important and so needed. A dog can be a wonderfully simple bridge to connect us with others. We all know that a comfort-giving dog can ease pre-existing tension, lessen physical pain, and bring joy and peace of mind. Because we are a welcome and non-threatening presence, our message of Christ's love can better be received and accepted. Our dogs so perfectly radiate the unconditional love of Jesus. This is a ministry in which we need to suppress our own egos and make sure we are ministering with the right motives – not for personal recognition, and not even for our own satisfaction. The real accolades belong only to God, not to us or even our dogs. Let us humbly do this ministry for the glory of God alone, to spread His love and to make His name known to a lost and hurting world. And in doing so, let's continue to pursue a more intimate relationship not only with our dogs, but with Jesus Himself, our Creator, Sustainer, Deliverer, Shepherd, Priest, and King. This is truly our most significant and crucial relationship of all.