

## Preparing a Therapy Animal

*[ED. NOTE: Many of these ideas can be used when working with an older dog. Just remember to take into consideration your dogs past experiences or 'baggage'. A puppy is a clean slate whereas an older dog brings a history with him into each situation.]*

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Socialization of animals to be used in therapy work can start as early as a few weeks of age. If you breed dogs and feel your line is appropriate for therapy use, frequent handling can begin to aid the animal later in the close confines of some therapy work. Remember, early socialization of any puppy is important.

Along with cuddling a puppy (preparation for the restrained hug), hold it in your lap both upright and upside down. A lot of petting, exposure to other people and animals, frequent fondling of ears, tail and toes is extremely helpful. I like to place my animals in gradually increasing stressful situations where sudden, unexpected noises occur. This helps to reassure the dog about conditions they will encounter in the "real" world.

I will ask my puppy to allow me to touch his teeth, tongue and gums. A little "doggy toothpaste" on my finger is excellent preparation for brushing teeth. Touching toes, graduating to holding the nails and finally to filing with an emery board prepares the pup for the clippers and or nail grinder! Running the nail grinder and grooming clippers while doing the gentle touching also helps to adjust to the time when the instruments will actually come in contact with nails and coat. All of the above is done in very short time periods so the stress is kept to a minimum and trust is maximized.

As soon as it is safe to take the dog out on walks (after final puppy shots) it is time to begin exploring the world. At first, visits around your neighborhood are good. Then you can go to parks, parking lots and malls. Be sure to do this gradually keeping exposure time to a few minutes. It can be very helpful to take your puppy into new situations with a dog who is already used to the bizarre. Young dogs learn a lot when they are with an old hand.

Once your animal is accustomed to visiting try arranging to take him with you when you do your errands. My hairdresser is a fellow dog lover and when I explained what I was doing with Testa, she invited me to bring her with me when I got my hair done. I am pleased and delighted with the cooperation people are willing to extend when they realize the type of training I am doing with my dog.

By all means take your pet to your veterinarian's office just to visit and get pets. The same theory should be applied wherever you need to go that sometimes results in unpleasant experiences for your animal.

If the children in your area will help, see if you can expose your pup to lots of little people. Children are a different species than adults to dogs and frequently the quickness and noise of playing children can trigger a "prey" drive in your dog that will limit its ability to be used in a therapeutic setting with children later on. Early imprinting with running, yelling kids can make a difference as to whether or not you can take you dog into a children's residential setting or a children's hospital.

Enroll in a puppy kindergarten class. Take a trip with your dog to PetSmart. Animal socializing is as important as people and children socialization. Take your dog to "fun matches", soccer games and other crowd gatherings. A walk downtown where traffic on foot, in the streets, horses clopping by and lots of people too busy to stop and pet your animal are great exposure to unusual noises and smells. Be sure to watch for stress levels and cut a walk short if your dog becomes upset. A word of caution: don't become emotional if your animal becomes frightened. The best reassurance for him is if you are calm and act as if there is nothing unusual in the surroundings or with him. Very often this can make the difference as to whether he will accept the atypical or refuse to participate without it being a traumatic experience for both of you. Be calm, have fun and don't let weeds grow around your dreams.