



Pet Partners®
of Central New York
Making Life Better - Together

Preparing Your Puppy to be a Therapy Dog



I just got a puppy and we want to become a therapy animal team.

Where do I start?

At Pet Partners, this is a question we hear all the time. We've put together a few suggestions for aspiring therapy dog teams that are grounded in our philosophy of YAYABA™ or You Are Your Animal's Best Advocate.

Begin Socialization

Puppies need a variety of experiences from car rides to visiting with all kinds of people, to going to as many settings as you can imagine. Take your puppy to places such as a public park, a garden center, or a pet store. Allow them to meet people of different ages and ethnicities as well as individuals wearing uniforms, hats and glasses. Each new experience should be pleasant and positive. As you are exposing your puppy to new people and places, be prepared and expect the unexpected because one negative experience can have a life-long impact on a dog. Don't overdo socialization. It's better to have short, but frequent, positive experiences.

Consistent Handling

Therapy animals need to be at ease with physical contact. When they are young, start by touching their body everywhere including feet, ears, tail and mouth. Begin with soft and gentle touch and work up to slightly clumsy, but never painful, touch. Also take time every day to establish comfort with grooming. Brush hair and teeth and touch, clip or file your pup's nails. Decide if you will be the person to give your dog a bath or if you will have a professional groomer do these tasks. If you plan to use a groomer, be sure and introduce your puppy to the groomer and equipment at an early age.



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Develop a Trusting Relationship

Like any friendship you must experience different things together and discover what makes both of you happy. For experiences that are less desirable for your animal, take steps to improve the situation or shorten its duration.

As a therapy animal team, your animal will count on you to advocate for them while visiting. By taking that role seriously for your puppy, they will come to trust that you consistently make decisions in their best interest. This trust is the cornerstone for the teamwork needed for every successful therapy animal team.

Start Training

This is something you can work on individually or with a trainer. Consider the methodology the training center and trainer uses when you select a program. The [Association for Professional Dog Trainers](#) is a great source of information.

Pet Partners advocates for positive reinforcement and force free methods for training because it contributes to the trusting relationship you are building. See the list below of trainers in our area that Pet Partners of CNY is happy to recommend.

Don't neglect your own training. Learning to read your animal's body language is critical for a therapy animal handler. The canine body language course on the Pet Partners National website is a great place to start. Check out [Canine Body Language Resources | Pet Partners](#)

Find a Veterinarian

A successful relationship with your veterinarian is built on mutual trust, respect and communication. Look for someone with a similar approach to pet care as you who will be open to questions and who values your observations about your animal.

Determine Aptitude and Interest

Successful therapy animals enjoy spending time not just with their owner or family, but with people they haven't met previously. They enjoy providing comfort to others and seek out interactions.

It is your responsibility to ensure that your animal truly enjoys – not just *tolerates* – therapy animal interactions. A dog with strong obedience skills may be able to perform some therapy animal tasks, however if they are enduring the interactions because they feel they must follow your direction, that may ultimately erode the trusting relationship with your animal.

It is up to every pet owner to be their animal's advocate and make choices in their animal's best interests – including whether therapy work is the right choice.