



What is a therapy dog?

A therapy dog is in fact part of a therapy dog/handler team. In other words, a dog can only be a therapy dog when working with the handler with whom they have been evaluated and certified, which is also usually their guardian. A dog and their handler only become a therapy dog/handler team when they have been tested and registered by one of the therapy dog registries, such as Therapy Dogs International, Inc. (www.tdi-dog.org). This testing verifies that the dog has been trained to be mannerly and is comfortable around other people, other animals, and in a multitude of environments and is SAFE. Teams must maintain their annual registration with TDI in order to remain certified and covered by TDI's liability insurance.

Once a team has been registered with TDI they may be invited to visit people in hospitals, nursing home, schools and other locations. Therapy dogs should NOT be taken places unless you have first talked with the management of the place you intend to visit and they have indicated you are welcome.

A therapy dog/handler team does not have the same rights as an assistance/service dog and in fact, TDI does not register dogs as part of therapy dog/handler teams if they are being used as an assistance/service dog.

What training is necessary for a therapy dog?

The dog in a therapy dog/handler team should be trained to a level so that they can easily pass the TDI therapy dog test. Details of the test can be found at TDI's website (<http://www.tdi-dog.org/images/TestingBrochure.pdf>). The test is similar to the American Kennel Club's Canine Good Citizen test with some additional tests added. While attendance in a dog training class is not a requirement, in my experience as a TDI Evaluator, most teams that pass the test have gone through at least two or three levels of group training classes.

Over the years I have noticed that the following parts of the test are the ones that are most difficult:

Test 4: Out for a Walk (Walking on a Loose Leash)

This test demonstrates that the handler is in control of the dog. The dog can be on either side of the handler, whichever the handler prefers. There must be a left turn, a right turn and an about turn, with at least one stop in between and another at the end. The dog need not be perfectly aligned with the handler and need not sit when the handler stops.

PER TDI TESTING GUIDELINES "The Evaluation begins as soon as the Evaluator is able to observe you and your dog, not only when you are going through the test requirements as a dog/handler team." This means that the neither the dog or the handler should be making the leash tight at any time during the evaluation or at any time when they are in the evaluation area.



Test 8: Reaction to Another Dog

This test demonstrates that the dog can behave politely around other dogs. Two handlers and their dogs approach each other from a distance of about 10 yards, stop, shake hands and exchange pleasantries, and continue on for about 5 yards. The dogs should show no more than a casual interest in each other.

In this part of the test we are actually asking the dog to be indifferent to their own species and expecting them not to try to greet one another. This can be especially difficult for young, friendly dogs. Having an excellent attention behavior and an automatic sit can be very helpful for passing this part of the evaluation.

Test 9: Reactions to Distractions (Leave-It)

The handler with the dog on a loose leash walks past food on the ground (placed within a distance of three feet) and, upon command, the dog should ignore the food.

As scavengers, dogs have a natural instinct to check out food. An excellent attention or leave-it behavior will help a dog pass this test.

Test 10: Supervised Separation

This test demonstrates that a dog can be left with a trusted person, if necessary, and will maintain its training and good manners. Evaluators are encouraged to say something like, “Would you like me to watch your dog?” and then take hold of the dog’s leash. The owner will go out of site for three minutes. The dogs does not have to stay in position but should not continually bark, whine, or pace unnecessarily, or show anything stronger than mild agitation or nervousness.

Dogs need to be well socialized and comfortable around all types of people, including strangers, in order to pass this part of the test. This is not so much a training issue as one of helping your dog learn to cope emotionally with being left with someone new in your absence. Lots of gradual practice is essential to passing this part of the test. Dogs that are asked and expected to “stay” when left in this situation usually get more anxious.

Test 11: Say Hello

The TDI Certified Evaluator will test the willingness of each dog to visit a person and that the dog can be made readily accessible for petting (i.e. small dogs can be placed on a person’s lap or can be held, medium and larger dogs can sit on a chair or stand close to the patient to be easily reached.)

When I conduct this part of the test I am looking for a dog that willingly approaches me and obviously wants to interact in a friendly manner yet, is not overly rambunctious. If a dog does not have a gregarious personality and is not interested in meeting people they



may be able to pass other parts of the test but may not enjoy doing therapy work. It is not fair to ask such a dog to be part of a therapy dog/handler team.

Dogs that have been trained to shake or do other things with their paws often fail this part of the test because they initiate contact with their paws without being cued to do so.

Can any dog be part of a therapy dog/handler team?

Any dog/handler team can take the TDI test but as I have alluded to above, not all dogs will be suitable for therapy work. A dog/handler team can take the test, pass, and successfully do therapy work for years and then reach a point where it is no longer fun for the dog. This is what happened with my Golden Retriever, Tikken. She passed the test shortly after her first birthday and we started doing visits two to three times a month, primarily to nursing homes and group homes for children. She did very well and patients really enjoyed her visits. Then after a few years I noticed she was hesitant walking into the door of the nursing home one day. We decide to go home that day and tried a couple of more times. When she continued to be hesitant I knew it was time for Tikken to retire form therapy work. No matter how much the patients need and want to see our dog, our first responsibility is to our dogs needs.

When should one starting training a dog for therapy work?

Although a dog cannot take the TDI therapy dog test until they are one year old, training for therapy work can, and in my opinion should, start in a puppy socialization class at 8 weeks of age. I believe a major factor in a dog's success as a therapy dog will involve a well designed socialization program that will expose a puppy to a wide variety of people, places and things.

Don Hanson, BFRP, CDBC, CPDT
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