



FEATURE

So.. you want your puppy to become a therapy dog?

**Words & Images: ~ JODY ASQUITH
Paws Pet Therapy Dog Trainer & Assessor**

To a certain extent, therapy dogs are “born, not made”. It’s not possible to train the innate intuitiveness and empathy possessed by a great therapy dog. However, there are certainly things that breeders and owners of young puppies can be doing now to maximise their potential to become successful therapy dogs of the future.

Paws Pet Therapy

PAWS Pet Therapy (PAWS) is a registered charity, founded in 2012. PAWS train and supports dog and handler teams to carry out safe, enjoyable pet therapy visits to people with a range of needs. PAWS currently operates primarily in New South Wales, with teams in the ACT and South Australia.

PAWS teams visit a wide variety of facilities, providing tailored pet therapy to clients of all age groups and backgrounds:

- Hospital wards including:
palliative care, rehabilitation, cancer centres
- Aged care
- Mental health facilities
- Support for workers in high stress roles
(e.g. ambulance control centre)
- Universities for:
Mental health week, RUOK days, Exam support



- Libraries – support HSC students
- School groups including:
Special needs, Children with autism, After school and vacation care
- Paws 'n' Tales reading program - working in schools with children with literacy issues, aged 4-8 years.

The benefits of spending time with a dog are known and have been shown to include physiological health benefits, encouraging social interactions, and emotional support for patients, their families, and staff. A session of pet therapy can stimulate memory and encourage reminiscing in dementia patients and reduces stress, anxiety and depression for mental health patients, providing a welcome distraction and an interaction involving unconditional affection. Staff at all facilities also benefit from PAWS visits, and when staff are happy, they are more likely to provide high quality care.



Dogs in the Paws 'n' Tales program provide a non-judgemental audience for children to practise reading and develop confidence, help to improve social skills, and support children that have experienced trauma.

Requirements

Before they can start visits, PAWS volunteers and dogs must pass an assessment. The team is observed taking part in a role play of visiting patients in a hospital bed and visiting someone in a wheelchair. Dogs need to demonstrate good manners and the volunteer needs to demonstrate that they have control of their dog. Dogs shouldn't be dragging volunteers along, no jumping up, no forcing into a person's space unless invited. Dogs should not be unduly concerned at being in a new environment and be happy to interact with unfamiliar people. They should be comfortable to be handled and to get very close to the "patient".

Characteristics of a therapy dog

There are core characteristics that are essential for therapy dogs. Dogs must be friendly and comfortable with being in close proximity to people and being handled, without being too "pushy". Dogs should be confident and relaxed in different environments with different people. If a dog meets these requirements, there are other varying characteristics that can determine the type of therapy that is the best match.

A dog that is placid and easy-going is better suited to visiting people that are frail or very unwell (such as in palliative care wards) than a dog that is playful and

exuberant. However, the fun loving and outgoing dog is usually great with children and younger, more robust people like university students.

Routine-loving dogs do well on regular visits to the same facility, whereas dogs that have the ability to adapt can be better where the environment and types of clients visited is variable.

Some of the characteristics will tend to be hard-wired and possibly breed-specific, such as outgoing and exuberant versus reserved and placid. However, others can be developed or modified through socialisation and training. For example, basic obedience training can help an otherwise pushy dog to learn good manners. Lots of exposure to a variety of environments and people, combined with positive experiences, will build confidence in dogs that tend to be timid and anxious.

Socialisation for therapy dogs

Socialising your dog means enabling them to have opportunities to develop the skills to cope with a wide variety of environments, situations, people and other animals. The most important areas of socialisation for therapy dogs are:

- **Handling** – the dog being comfortable with having a person touch him or her all over the body, especially head, face, chest and back, but also feet and tail. Small dogs should be comfortable with being picked up by people, other than their owners, and happy to sit on people's laps.
- **Grooming and preparation** – therapy dogs need to be able to tolerate regular grooming, particularly baths and nail trimming. They should be comfortable wearing a vest or other uniform items.
- **People** – people of different genders, ethnicities and builds. Older people and children (including toddlers and infants). People with disabilities, especially people with mobility aids, like wheelchairs or walking frames.
- **Ground/floor surfaces** – concrete, slippery floors, metal (noisy) surfaces, uneven or wobbly surfaces, stairs, carpet

- **Noises** – children and babies, alarms, electrical “beeps” and “pings”, vacuum cleaners, traffic, engines or equipment sounds, metal items banging together
- **Environments** – busy walkways, car parks, inside different buildings
- **Objects** – brooms, trolleys (e.g. cleaner’s trolley), umbrellas, items blowing in the wind

About Jody Asquith

Jody has been a volunteer with Paws Pet Therapy since early 2014 and has a team of four accredited therapy dogs to choose from for her visits. She is a Paws committee member and the Paws dog trainer and assessor. Jody has over 20 years’ experience training her own dogs and more than 15 years’ experience in helping other people to train theirs. She uses reward-based training methods and complies with the Association of Pet Dog Trainers (APDT) Australia Code of Ethics.

Jody operates her own business, Think Dog, with the objective of helping people to make the most of the human-canine relationship through tailored, in-home training. She and her canine partners take part in numerous dog sports including agility, obedience, rally obedience, canine freestyle and heelwork to music. She is also a DOGS NSW Member.

About the Dogs

Belgian Shepherd (Groenendael) is CH MIRRIBANDI FANCY THAT HTM.S JC “Fancy”. Fancy is six years old and has been visiting for over three years. Currently she visits a medical ward at Campbelltown Hospital weekly. She is very much a shepherd, after greeting a client she often turns and sits close against them and “keeps an eye on things” in the room.

Jack Russell Terrier is HICKMOTT BOLD BRASSY, aka “Bunny”. Bunny is six years old and has been visiting since she was only 18 months of age. She is a very special dog and a true “natural” therapy dog. Her strong empathy and intuition draw her to the people that really need her. This has been especially apparent since she started weekly visits to the palliative care ward at Liverpool Hospital, providing comfort to patients, families and staff.

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