

What Makes A Good Therapy Dog?

CALM

There is a lot of stimulation in most environments that need therapy dogs, so your dog needs to be calm most of the time. That means sitting patiently while getting petted and loved on, even when the people petting and loving aren't being as gentle as the dog would like.

GENTLE

Being gentle is another crucial characteristic for therapy dogs. Some dogs are born with a naturally gentle temperament, but some dogs become gentler with age. Having a gentle mouth is a must (especially around children), but that behavior can be learned through training if necessary.

CONFIDENT

Good therapy dogs should be confident enough to go up to people that they don't know. Therapy dogs often spend time around unfamiliar people, smells, equipment, and noises. Additionally, the people therapy dogs visit sometimes have unfamiliar movements and a lack of coordination. These environmental factors could upset some dogs, but a good therapy dog will have the confidence to be calm and loving no matter the environment.

WELL-MANNERED

Having good manners is a little bit of temperament and a little bit of training. Any dog can learn good manners through obedience training, but a good therapy dog will have a naturally obedient disposition and will want to use his manners even without an incentive.

QUIET

Therapy dogs are naturally quiet and don't get overly excited. Of course, all dogs bark and communicate through grunts and whines, but a good therapy dog will be quiet most of the time.

Responsive but non-reactive: When a dog is responsive, that means that he seeks out and responds positively to attention and love. Sometimes when that attention is more aggressive than he prefers, he needs to be non-reactive and either remove himself from the attention or endure it patiently.

PEOPLE-LOVING

Probably the most important service dog characteristic is that he loves people. He needs to love being touched and meeting new people all the time. It's ok if he loves other dogs as well, but when he's working as a therapy dog, he needs to be able to ignore other dogs and focus on the people he's helping.

Temperament and training are key factors to a dog's success as a therapy animal, but potentially more important is that the dog needs to want to serve as a therapy animal, too. If your dog shows no interest in helping those outside of your family, he probably won't do very well as a therapy dog.