

Teaching 4 Essential Skills for Pet Therapy Dogs



Pet therapy dogs have a unique role, offering comfort, calmness, and joy to people in various environments. If you're interested in training your dog for pet therapy, here are four essential skills to start with, plus step-by-step instructions to help your pup shine as a therapy dog! 🐶❤️

1 Skill: Calm Greetings

A therapy dog should remain calm and controlled when greeting people, without jumping or excessive excitement while still clearly seeking friendly contact with each person.

How to Train:

- **Start with Focus Training:** Teach your dog to focus on you with a cue like "watch me" and reward them for eye contact. This will help them stay attentive. Next place cookies on the floor to keep your dog's four feet on the floor.
- **Practice Sit for Greeting:** Encourage your dog to sit when they approach someone for a greeting. Have a friend approach, and if your dog remains seated, give them a treat and praise. If they get up, reset and try again. Only have the second person interact with your dog if you have a successful greeting.

2 Skill: Desensitization to Sounds and Surfaces

Therapy dogs should be comfortable around unfamiliar sounds and surfaces, as they may visit hospitals, schools, or nursing homes with different flooring and noises.

How to Train:

- **Introduce New Surfaces Slowly:** Start by having your dog walk on various textures like mats, carpet, and hardwood. Use treats to reward them for each new surface they confidently explore.
- **Sound Exposure:** Play recordings of common sounds like hospital beeps, wheelchairs, or school bells at a low volume. Reward your dog for remaining calm, and gradually increase the volume over time.
- **Practice in Different Settings:** Take your dog to new, safe environments like pet-friendly stores or parks to practice desensitization skills. Always pairing every environment and situation with treats. Remember to observe for calm and provide physical touch and treats for this behavior so you can grow it.

3 Skill: Gentle Touch Tolerance

Therapy dogs often receive gentle petting, hugs, or even awkward touches from those they comfort, so it's important they're comfortable with handling, poking, pulling and clumsy petting.

How to Train:

- **Start with Basic Touch Tolerance:** Practice handling your dog's ears, paws, and tail. Reward them for staying calm, even with these gentle, sometimes awkward touches. If your dog needs it you can use a stuffed Kong to help get success.
- **Involve Friends for Practice:** Have friends gently pet your dog while you supervise, rewarding your pup for remaining relaxed. Again, use a Kong or a very high rate of reinforcement, meaning you machine gun cookies every two to three seconds.
- **Teach a "Relax" Cue:** Pair calm behavior with a "relax" cue. When your dog is in a relaxed position, say "relax," then reward them. This cue reinforces calmness and can be a great tool during therapy visits.

4 Skill: “Leave It” for Control and Safety

A well trained “leave it” cue is crucial for therapy dogs, especially when navigating environments with tempting or potentially unsafe items.

How to Train:

- **Begin with a Treat in Your Hand:** Hold a treat in your hand and close your fist. When your dog looks away and disengages from your hand and no longer tries to get the treat, say “yes” and reward. Once you are willing to bet 100 dollars your dog will immediately disengage when the fist with a treat is presented, add the cue “leave it”.
- **Increase the Challenge:** Gradually build up to opening your hand and then to lowering your hand toward the floor. Make sure you have at least 80 percent success!
- **Practice in Different Environments:** Once your dog is consistent, practice this skill in various settings, gradually increasing distractions to strengthen their control.
- Never let your dog eat “the leave it!” It is very important that your dog is not accidentally taught to leave it and then eat it. Treat each “leave it treat” as if it was a poison pill!

 Training for therapy work is a rewarding journey that takes patience, dedication, and positivity. These skills not only help dogs in therapy roles but also create strong, calm, and reliable companions for everyday life. Take it slow, celebrate small wins, and enjoy the bond that builds as you and your dog learn together. With these skills, your pup will be well on their way to becoming a trusted therapy companion! 

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