

# Ten Steps to Selecting a Therapy Dog



Most therapy dogs are well-mannered, calm, good-natured and happy family pets. If you want to raise and work with a therapy dog, it will help if you have a clear plan. Here are 10 issues to consider:

## 1.) Your Lifestyle

Dogs, including therapy dogs, are social animals. Any dog coming into your home requires time, training, play, affection and exercise. Are you willing to make the commitment needed to provide a "Forever Home" for a dog?

## 2.) Your age, physical condition and health

Therapy dogs come in all shapes and sizes. They may be a purebred or a mutt, a rescue dog or a puppy. Do your homework and select a dog that is right for you. If you're a senior, for instance, you may regret introducing an energetic border collie into your home. If you're a young person, a lap dog may not meet your exercise needs.

## 3.) Double check your budget

A responsible pet owner needs to consider the costs of obtaining and raising a pet. There are veterinary costs (anticipated or unexpected), good quality pet food, training classes, grooming and other expenses. A dog can live 15 years or more, with differing costs along the way. There are also nominal costs to belong to OTD.

## 4.) Your physical space

Do you have outdoor space? Is it enclosed? Are you able - and willing - to walk the dog regularly? No matter if you get a puppy or a rescue dog, you will need a safe place for it in your home until the pet is properly trained.

## 5.) Research breeds

Any dog, purebred or mixed, can be a therapy dog. However, some dogs are just naturally better suited to therapy dog work than others. Golden Retrievers, for instance, were bred to be companion dogs and usually, with training, pass the OTD evaluation. Other breeds were bred as guard dog, or for herding or hunting and may not be so suitable. Size is also a consideration. Little dogs, such as toy poodles or dachshunds, are cuddly, easy to hold and can be held by a person in a wheelchair. Some medium- or larger-sized dogs may be better with children.

## 6.) Research the breeder

If you decide to purchase from a breeder, do your research. Talk to people in your dog community who may have knowledge of reputable breeders. Check out websites of local and national dog clubs as well as the Canadian Kennel Club (CKC). A breeder should be willing to do health and temperament tests with their litters and socialize them. If you decide to go with a rescue group, what do you know about the organization?

## 7.) Visit your potential pet

If you want a pup, meet the sire and dam to assess whether or not they have the friendly, calm personalities needed to be a therapy dog. If you decide to adopt a rescue dog, try to learn as much as possible about the dog's background. Was the dog abandoned because the owner died, for example, or did the dog have "issues"? Try not to let your emotions interfere with sound judgment.

## 8.) Socialize, socialize, socialize

Get your new dog outside and gradually introduce it to new places, different noises, people, children and other animals. Use positive reinforcement (treats, toys, praise) to shape behavior in a fair, quiet and consistent manner. No matter if it's a pup or a rescue dog, socialization will not only help in therapy dog training, but your bond with your dog will grow stronger working together.

## 9.) Training

Dogs need consistent rules. Make sure everyone in your house is on the same page when it comes to rules: for instance, will the dog be allowed on furniture? Enroll in obedience classes that offer a fun, positive, motivational approach to training. Consider a class to prepare both of you for the therapy dog evaluation. The Canine Good Citizenship Test includes many OTD evaluation components and is usually included in advanced obedience training.

## 10.) Love your dog, no matter the outcome

If you don't pass the OTD evaluation the first time, remember, you can always try again. There may be some areas of training that need more practice or you might discover that your dog would be better suited to other canine activities: fly ball, agility, rally obedience, tracking, or just spending time with your family. You can also do the evaluation with another dog that you know well.

## For further information:

Canadian Kennel Club at [www.ckc.ca](http://www.ckc.ca)  
Volhard Puppy Aptitude Test at [www.volhard.com](http://www.volhard.com)  
Ontario SPC at [www.ontariospc.ca](http://www.ontariospc.ca)

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OTD Toolbox Infosheet #13

## Good dogs doing great work!



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