

Therapy Work – One of the Most Rewarding Activities You Can Do With Your Dog

By Susan Roberts

A number of years ago I decided to look for an activity that I could do with my lovely and sweet 3 year old Golden Retriever named Callum as I felt I needed a new focus away from a stressful career and Callum needed a job. After some thought and research I discovered an organization that is now known as Ottawa Therapy Dogs (OTD). I contacted the coordinator at the time, Marilyn Benoit, who was one of the founders of the organization. That phone call put me on a path that has been personally extremely rewarding. Callum and I visited the elderly in retirement homes and long-term care patients in hospitals for several years and had a wonderful time getting to know and providing some pleasure to people with truly amazing backgrounds. Since moving to an area that makes regular therapy visits with Callum difficult, I have served on the Board of Directors and am currently an evaluator for OTD. As a result, I am still helping to keep this organization a vital contributor to the community. Would you like to investigate the possibility of achieving the same sense of personal satisfaction? Here's how to do it.

There are several organizations in the Ottawa/Gatineau area that provide therapy dog programs, including the Humane Society and St. John Ambulance. I will speak for the organization with which I am most familiar – Ottawa Therapy Dogs. The job of visiting members of our society who may be elderly, ill or incapacitated in some way is an important and sensitive one. For that reason there are a number of steps in the process of becoming an OTD therapy team that provide an opportunity to determine whether it is, in fact, a job that you and your canine friend would enjoy, as well as an excellent way to learn new skills and knowledge in the area of therapy work. After an initial introductory session, you will attend a more detailed orientation. This will be followed up by an evaluation of you and your dog's suitability and finally a series of mentored facility visits. Let's look at these in a little more detail.

Introductory Information Session

OTD holds general introductory information sessions a number of times a year that are open to any interested folks and that will provide an overview of what therapy work is all about, more about OTD as an organization as well as the expectations of therapy dog teams.

Orientation Session

If, at the end of the introductory session, you feel that this is an activity that you might enjoy with your canine friend, you will contact OTD who will schedule you for a more detailed orientation. This session will drill deeper into what therapy work is all about and give you more detail on the behaviour and standards that are expected from our teams. For example, do you know what the term zoonoses means, and what is required to manage it? Would you know the appropriate way to approach a person in a wheelchair? How do you ensure that your dog is appropriately groomed for a therapy visit? What other activities might you consider that may be on the periphery of traditional therapy work but still related? The orientation sessions are an excellent way to expand your knowledge of the fascinating field of therapy work. This is also when you start completing the paperwork that is inevitably required for the kind of sensitive work that you and your canine friend hope to perform. For example, there are police

checks that need to be applied for, privacy documents that need to be signed as well as other documents that begin the formalization process of having you join the ranks of OTD.

Evaluation

If, after the orientation session, you are still interested in pursuing therapy work, OTD will schedule you and your canine friend for an evaluation. During this approximately 2 hour session, you and your dog will be assessed for suitability as a therapy dog team. This is where we see whether you can walk with your dog calmly on a loose leash, whether your dog can follow basic commands like 'sit' and 'down', whether your dog enjoys having people around him or her and ensure that he or she does not spook without speedy recovery when in crowds or when exposed to loud noises. It is also important that your dog is properly groomed. It is not only your dog who is evaluated. We also watch to ensure that the handler is dressed appropriately for therapy visits, is actively engaged with his or her dog, and is proactively in control of the dog in potentially stressful situations.

Mentor Visits

So you have now come through the introductory session, the detailed orientation AND you and your canine friend have come through the evaluation successfully. Now comes the really fun stuff. You get to visit a facility – but in mentored situations. In consultation with you, the evaluators would have determined the type of facility that is most appropriate for you and your dog to visit. It may be a retirement home, or a rehabilitation facility or a hospital or another kind of facility. OTD will partner you with an existing OTD member or 'mentor team' which consists of a handler and their dog, and you will accompany that team on one of their visits, hopefully in a similar type of facility as the one you will be visiting. Your own dog will stay home for this visit. This gives you a real live opportunity to see a therapy team at work and understand better the behaviour that is expected of you and your dog. After this visit, OTD will assign a mentor to accompany you and your dog on your first couple of visits in your own facility to make sure that you feel comfortable in your role and that there is someone available to guide you and answer any questions that you might have. Assuming everything goes well during these visits, the mentor then sets you and your canine friend free to handle future visits yourself. There is always a mentor or someone available at OTD to answer questions that you may have at any time in your new role as an OTD therapy team.

The work of an OTD handler and his or her dog is, in my mind, critical in our society today. I have seen the effects first hand, for example, on a Parkinson's patient, whose trembling visibly eased when she petted my dog. I have seen critically ill patients generate huge smiles when they see my dog coming into their hospital room, and I have had nurses tell me about a patient who inexplicably came out of her fit when someone mentioned that 'Callum' was coming down the hall.

The R.E.A.D Program

In addition to traditional therapy visits, OTD also runs a R.E.A.D program. This stands for Reading Education Assistance Dogs. The R.E.A.D. program improves children's reading and communication skills by employing a powerful method: reading to a dog. But not just any dog.

R.E.A.D. dogs are registered therapy animals who have been actively and successfully doing therapy visits for at least one year. They then undergo a further evaluation that is geared specifically to the R.E.A.D program and, if successful, then volunteer with their owner/handler as a team, going to schools and libraries as reading companions for children. It isn't unusual to see a child lying on her back with her head resting on a dog, a book propped up in one hand and the other hand stroking the dog's ears while they read together. An experienced mentor is at hand to guide the child through the reading process, as needed, with the help of their dog. While dogs may not be able to read, they make great listeners. Their relaxed, non-judgemental presence creates an inviting and motivating environment that is comfortable, safe, empowering and FUN!

"We thought the program was excellent. We read with Darren* every day and we see his constant progress... [and] the positive effect of his weekly sessions with Lia and Mrs. Lambert. He looked forward to every Tuesday and took his reading very seriously because he knew that he would be reading to Lia. His hand was on her head or under her chin the whole time he was reading to her. He did his very best and his reading improved." Darren's Dad Ottawa, Ontario *Child's name has been changed.

The concept is simple, but the results are compelling. Children who participate in the R.E.A.D. program make enormous strides in reading and communications skills while building self-esteem, confidence and social skills along the way.

In conclusion, Golden Retrievers are usually ideal for therapy work because of their sweet and calm natures and their love of people. I hope I have inspired some of you to think about therapy work – either by getting involved directly or by supporting a therapy organization in your community with a donation or offering up skills and time towards keeping this vital service going. I know first hand how much work and resources are required in keeping these programs active in the community. It is huge. If you are interested in looking more closely at these programs, please research the organizations in your community that do this work. To look further at the possibility of joining Ottawa Therapy Dogs or to offer up a donation to keep this important work going, please visit www.ottawatherapydogs.ca