

"There Is No Greater Therapy than the Love of a Dog"

by Joyce Miller

A dog that likes meeting people is gentle, adaptable to new environments, totally non-aggressive. Does this description sound like your Airedale? Maybe, but it also describes the temperament of a therapy dog, a dog that visits hospitals, nursing homes, detention facilities, and rehabilitation facilities with its owner.

Like many other activities that people can do with their dogs, therapy dog work is gaining in popularity, and thanks to published research about the benefits of dogs as therapy, more and more facilities are opening their doors to dogs. Twenty years ago, most nursing homes forbade visits by animals. Today, more than half have their own pet therapy programs. Published research has shown that pets are beneficial in therapy, that people who have pets have lower risks of heart disease, and that pets can build rapport with hard to reach patients and help patients improve self-esteem and reduce depression and anxiety. The dogs give patients something to think and talk about other than themselves and their physical problems. They provide emotional support, giving patients physical contact with other living creatures. And the dogs' unconditional love and acceptance provide a deep sense of comfort. According to Kathy Davis, author of Therapy Dogs: Training Your Dog to Reach Others, the dogs help other people without their owners knowing exactly how and why. They can also trigger people to do physical activities that they otherwise wouldn't do. For example, people who will not raise their hand to brush their own hair will reach out to pet a dog.

Many Airedales Work as Therapy Dogs. Airedales around the world are taking part in this work with their owners. And their owners -- breeders like Liz Mattison (Bristol Aires), Joan Clarke (Penaire), Anita Pisarcik (Stryking), and Nancy Foster (Willo-Aires) as well as ATCA members David Hofeling, Tom Smith, and Airedalers in other countries like Pip Smith (Canada) and Monica Dixon (UK) -- are finding the work rewarding and the benefits far reaching. Shelley DeMerchant (Appyairs) of Ontario Canada has been working with Airedales as therapy dogs for 15 years. Today, she has three therapy dogs and visits five facilities a month. She is affiliated with the St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog Program, a nationwide program in Canada. Shelley fondly recalls how her dogs have helped patients emotionally: the man who recounted his experiences with the Airedale he had as a child. Petting and caressing Shelley's Airedale, he smiled and said, "That Airedale was my best friend." On another occasion, they visited a lady who they had visited several times. She always petted the Airedale, but she never said a word. On this visit, she petted the dog and said, "Nice dog." Those were the first words the woman had uttered in six months. The dog broke through her barrier of loneliness and despair. Denise Masterson of Houston Texas is affiliated with Paws for Caring (PAWS), a local therapy dog program. She recalls visiting a man who could not talk because of a ventilator and tracheotomy. Her dog, Kirby, put his head up against the rails of the man's bed to be petted. When she left, the man smiled and mouthed 'thank you.' As an obedience teacher, Mary Lukaszewski worked with a group that often held winter classes at a nursing home in Stamford Connecticut. Patients loved to crowd into the room to watch the dogs train. Mary's Airedale, Big Jack, used to circulate around the room so patients could pet him or brush his coat while the others were being trained. One night while they were in class, the fire alarm went off. Jack entertained the patients on the back lawn until they could return to the facility. And Anna Marie Fornelli's Airedale, McGwin, became so important to an elderly friend that the man's family asked the Airedale to serve as an honorary pallbearer at his funeral.

Protect your dog. When working with your dog in a therapy visit, it is absolutely critical to pay attention to your dogs and never betray their trust. Donna Noland of Remlap, Alabama, has worked with her Airedale, Dosi, through The Delta Society, a national therapy dog organization. Donna emphasizes the importance of knowing your dog and, if necessary, changing assignments to ensure a comfortable experience for your dog. When she first started doing therapy work, Donna and Dosi visited a domestic violence shelter. Not only were many of the small children afraid of the dog because of her size, but the dog was not happy in the confined space of the shelter. On one occasion, a child started petting Dosi and started hugging Dosi, soon squeezing her and refusing to let go. Donna moved in to loosen the child's grip. Dosi stood absolutely still, but Donna could tell that she wanted help. As Donna says, "She knew I was going to rescue her, and I did. That's one rule you have to remember when you are visiting: Protect your

dog.” Donna realized that her Airedale needed to be able to walk around and visit people without “plunking herself down to sit a spell.” Dosi then started visiting a Cancer Center and later a geriatric psychiatric clinic. In both of these places, Dosi could move from patient to patient, get a few pets and be on her way. Shelley DeMerchant also stresses the importance of knowing your dog. You must be familiar with his or her signs of stress: tail tucked, ears back, leaving sweaty paw prints on the floor, excessive panting, clinginess or that look of anxiety in their eye. The dog is telling you that he or she is not happy in the situation. Also, she cautions, you must be careful of things in the environment. Be aware, if your dog likes to check out wastebaskets, that people may dispose of their medication in these receptacles. Also be careful of people offering your dog food: they may offer them a cookie, but they may also offer them a pill thinking it is candy, or a bone, or a chocolate bar. Take along something like a bland vanilla wafer so you can give the patients something to feed your dog. Shelley recommends human food because the patients may eat it themselves!

Train and condition your dog. In addition to working her own dogs, Shelley tests and certifies dogs for the St. John program across Canada. Although therapy dogs need training and conditioning, they do not need to be trained for competitive obedience work. They do need to know the basics, such as reliable sits, stays, leave it, settle and other commands. Most organizations suggest that owners start out by having their dog tested for the American Kennel Club Canine Good Citizenship (CGC) title, a 10-part test, that includes accepting a friendly stranger, sitting politely for petting, welcoming grooming and examination, walking on a loose lead, walking through a crowd without over-exuberance or excessive shyness, sitting and staying in place, coming when called, behaving politely around other dogs, behaving confidently in distracting situations, and maintaining good manners when left with another person.

Rubyanna Skrede, who works at the Quansa Training Center in Illinois, uses five Airedales as therapy dogs. She says that when she and the other trainers at Quansa decided to do canine therapy work, they wanted to do it very well. They formed a group called Pet Ambassadors to the Community (PAC) that is known for calm and trustworthy dogs. Although their dogs are tested and certified by Therapy Dogs International (TDI), they are trained to pass a much more rigorous test than the TDI test. They also train each dog to do one simple trick because people love to see the dogs do tricks. And they train the dogs to wear costumes for holidays!

Rubyanna Skrede also recommends conditioning the dog, especially Airedales, to some situations that they may encounter during their visits. For Airedales, people may grab their face hair and not let go. So she says, condition the dog for this, for grabbing his ears, for grabbing the collar, for thumping on their heads enthusiastically. Also condition them for odd smells, such as things that smell like tiger balm. For machines that make funny noises and move erratically. For being backed into a corner by someone walking with a cane and reaching down for their face.

Hard work. Therapy work can be hard for both the owners and the dogs. Many people volunteer with the best of intentions, but in their early exuberance, they over commit themselves and their dogs, setting themselves up for burn out. Rubyanna Skrede recommends that you pace yourself and your dog. She says that any dog, but Airedales in particular, can get tired of all the petting. If you do too many visits, or the visits are too long, the dogs are apt to regard the work as boring and turn off. The same goes for the handler who must stay up and excited and happy for the people who are so happy to see the dog. Rubyanna says that you don't have to stay for a long visit, and Shelley DeMerchant stresses the importance of the commitment that you must make: “Many people that you visit eagerly anticipate the arrival of the dog. Can you imagine their disappointment if the dog does not show up?”

Your Dog Can Earn Therapy Titles. Susan Morawski, of Russell, Massachusetts, and her dog, Pepper (Wyndridge Starship Shaandra) work with Therapy Dogs International. Pepper, who will soon be nine, has been a therapy dog for four years and still enjoys her visits. According to Susan, “She always knows when it is Tuesday, and as soon as we turn the corner to the Nursing Home, she's up and wagging, ready to go.” At the nursing home, Pepper performs tricks for treats and gets lots of hugs and kisses.

Pepper earned Therapy Dogs International, Inc. working certificate/title “Therapy Dogs International Active Volunteer (TDIA).” This working certificate/title was developed by TDI, Inc. in 1999 to recognize "active volunteers who share their dogs for the benefit of others, and the dogs' tireless determination to

work in the field of therapy." In order to qualify for TDIA, Associate Members and their dog(s) are required to provide documentation of 50 therapy visits since the start of the program--May 15,1999. Now, Pepper and Susan are working on the next level of TDI titles: TDI Outstanding Volunteer, but, says Susan, "we need another 100 visits for that!"

Enjoy the Therapy Your Dog Provides. Joan Clarke of Fort Worth, Texas, began working with Paws Across Texas (PAT), a state-wide therapy dog program, in 1986. Her dogs -- first Sadie and then Sadie's daughter, Annie -- both passed PAT's rigid screening tests with flying colors. Sadie visited patients in nursing homes, and Annie specialized in visiting psychiatric rehabilitation facilities where she formed lasting relationships with patients who had low self esteem. Joan saw first hand how much the patients improved their self-esteem, as they cleaned Annie's teeth, brushed her coat, and commanded her to sit and down stay. Both Annie and Sadie took part in numerous Special Events. Joan said, "Our favorite was the Fort Worth Christmas Parade of Lights. Both Sadie and Annie wore their Reindeer Antlers and illuminated collar and lead, and both of them enjoyed the cheers and the smiles on all the children who came out to see Santa."

Is your Airedale a therapy dog? If you have a friendly, well mannered Airedale, if you're willing to commit to regular visits, and if you would like to share the love that your Airedale gives you with others, you might want to consider therapy dog work. If you do, you should look to one of the major organizations of therapy dogs to certify you and your dog as a team. In the United States, there are three national organizations and countless local groups. The national organizations are Therapy Dogs, Inc., Therapy Dogs International, and The Delta Society. Certification will make it easier for you to visit various facilities with your dog, and it will provide you with liability insurance. For more information on certification and how to prepare and evaluate yourself and your Airedale, see the following:

Organizations and sites on the Web

Delta Society Pet Partners Programs (206-226-7357): <http://petsforum.com/deltasociety>

Therapy Dogs Inc. <http://www.therapydogs.com>

<http://www.therapyanimals.org/links.php?linkSectionID=3>

<http://www.dog-play.com/join.html> This site has a list of local organizations listed by state

<http://www.dogsaver.org/dreamworkers>

Organizations

Therapy Dogs International

Tails of Joy/NW CT Dog Club (a division of Therapy Dogs International) Phone: 860-379-8879

Pet Assisted Therapy Facilitation Certificate Program, State University of New York Phone: 401-463-5809

Pet Assisted Therapy Services, San Jose, CA. Phone: 408-280-6171

St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog Program, 1199 Deyell 3rd Line, Milbrook, Ontario L0A 1G0

Pets As Therapy, a therapy dog organization in the United Kingdom that currently has approximately 4,500 dogs (and a few cats) doing therapy work with their owners.

Books:

Kathy Davis, Therapy Dogs: Training Your Dog to Reach Others, Howell Book House

Liz Palika, Love on a Leash: Giving Joy to Others through Pet Therapy, Alpine Blue Ribbon Books, 1-800-777-7257

J. Root, K-9 Therapy Groups: Organization and Management, Alpine Books, 1-800-777-7257

Articles

R. Voelker, *Puppy Love Can Be Therapeutic, Too* in The Journal of the American Medical Association (1995) 274 (24), 1897-1900.

R.J. Draper et al, *Defining the role of animals in psychotherapy* in Psychiatric Journal of the University of Ottawa (1990), 15 (3), 169-172.