

RISK COMMUNIQUÉ

THERAPY DOG PROGRAMS FOR SCHOOLS

The interest in therapy dogs and “Reading with Rover®” programs has been increasing within schools. Consideration of this new curriculum should be evaluated so that the program risks are anticipated and managed to achieve the educational and social benefits that are associated with therapy dog programs.

For many years pets have been used in therapeutic situations with humans. Therapy dogs, the most common pets of choice, have been used in many settings, from public schools and day care centers to children’s hospitals and nursing homes. With their unconditional affection and companionship, therapy dogs are used to raise spirits, reduce stress, and promote the general well-being of children and the elderly.

Therapy dogs are used to interact with people who have problems focusing and communicating, as well as assisting in physical therapy. It is important to keep in mind, however, that a therapy dog is not a service dog. Service dogs provide assistance to persons with physical disabilities, whereas a therapy dog is used for raising spirits and promoting general well-being.

Introducing a Therapy Dog Program

Ideally, when introducing a therapy dog program into your school, hiring a qualified outside organization that has experience in dog therapy has advantages, since many of the training, certification, experience and insurance requirements will likely be in place. In some cases schools may want to develop their own in-house programs using a staff member and pet, and with proper risk management controls this alternative is an option.

Evaluating the Dog Handlers

Some important considerations when evaluating the individuals responsible for a therapy dog program include:

- The trainers’ educational plan
- Dog certification and training documentation (e.g., Delta Society Pet Partners)
- Where and how to get a therapy dog trained and certified
- Prior experience and references (especially with the targeted age group)
- Identification of any other personnel to be responsible for handling the dogs
- Certificates of liability insurance (which should be provided and maintained)
- Prior claims against the dog or owner
- Background checks of the owners and handlers

Evaluating the Program Elements

Program considerations that are important factors to think about when planning to introduce a therapy dog program include the:

- Activities and interactions that are anticipated with the students
- Demographics of the population expected to be exposed to the therapy dog
- Number of students expected to be scheduled for dog therapy participation in any one session

This is a sample guideline furnished to you by Glatfelter Public Practice. Your organization should review it and make the necessary modifications to meet the needs of your organization. The intent of this guideline is to assist you in reducing risk exposure to the public, personnel and property. For additional information on this topic, you may contact your GPP Risk Control Representative. www.glatfelterpublicpractice.com

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- Length and number of sessions per day or week
- Identification and notification of students and teachers who may have allergic reactions or a fear of dogs
- Design and layout of the space provided for the dog and handler
- Routes of access into and out of the building in relationship to student and traffic flow
- Individuals responsible for daily grooming, feeding, and health issues
- Provisions for securing the dog and for outside rest breaks
- Responsibilities for cleaning up areas used by the dog
- Plans to evaluate and respond to the dog if it is showing signs of stress
- Emergency communication plan

Evaluating the Dog

When choosing a therapy dog, the dog should be relatively calm, interact well with people of all age groups, and **not** exhibit any uncontrolled jumping or running behaviors. The following are recommendations:

- **Breed** - Due to personality traits, Retrievers, Greyhounds, Collies and Newfoundlands are some of the more popular breeds.
- **Size** - When dealing with younger children, there may be fears of large dogs. Smaller dogs also need to be handled in a very gentle manner.
- **Health** - Any dogs being considered should be in good physical health, with updated vaccination records and negative fecal and heartworm exams.
- **Grooming** - Therapy dogs should be well groomed: clipped nails, free of parasites, bathed often, and lacking ear and eye discharge.
- **Temperament** - These dogs need to have stable temperaments with no signs of aggression toward people and other animals. Dogs should be able to tolerate loud noises, such as yelling, as well as sudden movements.

Stress is a common occurrence for both humans and for even the most relaxed therapy dogs. According to Linda Hume, LPN, AFT Specialist for the Northeast Rehabilitation Hospital, there are several signs to look for to tell whether a dog is becoming stressed¹:

- Excessive panting
- Whining/barking
- Tail tucked under
- Ears back
- Disinterest
- Excessive water drinking
- High-speed, small amplitude vibration at tip of tail vs. tail wag
- Excessive licking
- Willful disobedience
- Leaving sweaty paw prints
- Clinging to handler

¹ <http://www.northeastrehab.com/features/animal-facilitated-therapy/aft-therapy-dogs.htm>

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If a dog is displaying signs of stress, it is time to end the visit and allow the dog to relax. Handlers must keep a positive and happy attitude with their dogs since the dogs are very in tune with their trainers' moods and can pick up on stress trainers are feeling. It is also important to give therapy dogs adequate time to play and to just be dogs.

Parental Notification

It is very important to inform the parents and students of a therapy dog program. Students and teachers may have severe allergic reactions to certain types of dogs and possibly have a fear of dogs. Advance notification of a program should be communicated and alternatives provided for those who do not want to participate in the program. Forms should be distributed in advance, and signed consents and waivers provided prior to participation.

The following organizations have websites that can be very helpful in answering questions as they arise. They are also good sources for finding qualified therapy dog teams:

- **International Association of Canine Professionals**, www.dogpro.org
- **Therapy Dogs International**, www.tdi-dog.org/index.html
- **Canine Good Citizens Program of the American Kennel Club**, www.akc.org
- **Delta Society**, www.deltasociety.org

SOURCES:

- www.northeastrehab.com
- www.cofc.edu/~huntc/service.html
- www.dogpro.org