

“Therapy Dogs for Sale” --Can Therapy Dogs Be Purchased?

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As the popularity of Animal Assisted Interventions (AAI) increases, so, too, do the promotions for “therapy dogs” who can be purchased as puppies, adopted from rescues, and acquired from special therapy dog training programs. While it is entirely possible to obtain a very nice therapy dog from these sources, there are some red flags that this trend puts forward as well. *Caveat emptor*. Let the buyer beware. This brief article is designed to highlight some of the potential pitfalls of approaching such ads for therapy dogs without exercising some caution and knowledge.

Very often, therapists (mental health, allied health) and educators have limits on the number of dogs they can bring into their homes, so it is important that they select carefully. The author has a self-paced online course called *Selection of Dogs for Family Life and Therapy Work* available at low cost at www.risevanfleet.com/shop/product-category/onlinecourses/.

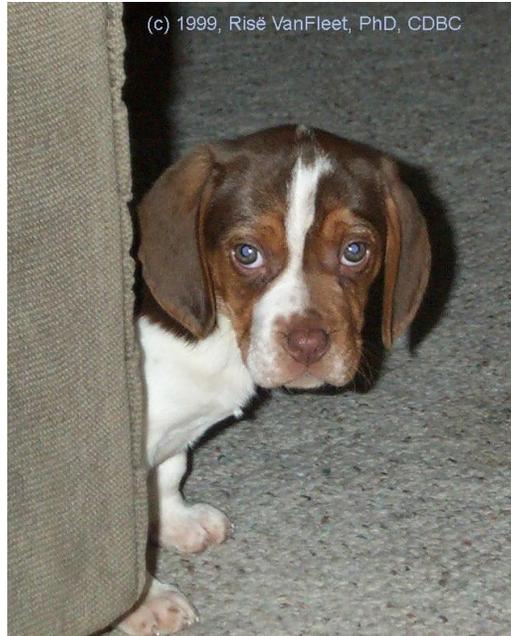
What is meant by “therapy dog?” The first question that pops into mind is what do the vendors mean by “therapy dog?” This term is often used broadly as if it refers to a single specific entity, and that all therapy dogs should be cut from the same cloth. This shows a misunderstanding of just how broad the field of AAI is! In Animal Assisted Play Therapy™ (AAPT), we might be looking for dogs to work with different populations of clients and who engage in very different activities with different energy levels. We use a “goodness of fit” model to match dogs’ personalities to the jobs they perform. We have even developed an article for trainers that details the broad range of personality characteristics, interests, and training needed for dogs engaged in different types of AAPT activities (please contact author by email if you wish to get a copy of this: rise@risevanfleet.com).

When considering a puppy or adult dog for therapy work, it is important to ask vendors what characteristics they believe that the puppy will have or the dog already has, and then compare those against your own goals for your involvement of dogs in your therapy work and setting.

The Parent Dogs

Some vendors will highlight the temperaments or accomplishments of the parent dogs, suggesting that their offspring will be similarly appropriate and talented. There is some truth to this, but it is by no means a sure bet. Basic genetics do play a role in temperament, and it is a very good idea to meet both parents of a puppy before committing to a purchase. This is not always possible, but you can ask to see video of the parent dogs if they are not available to observe on site. Unfortunately, just having parents who were appropriate therapy dogs does not guarantee that the offspring will be, however. There is variation in breeding, and the genetic make-up is far from the only contributor to the personality and interests of puppies.

Of course, with dogs adopted from shelters or rescues, the parentage is often unknown, and one must get to know the dogs under a wide range of circumstances to be able to draw conclusions about personality, stability, and the like. This does not preclude adopted dogs in any way--they simply must be observed carefully. Of course, that is true of puppies, too, even if we *do* know the parents!



CONTEXT MATTERS: While this pup hiding behind a couch might look unsuitable for therapy work, the context tells us more. This was his first time meeting two rambunctious adult dogs. Only observations in multiple situations showed him to be the stable, resilient dog he was to become. He had remarkable bounce-back after numerous serious medical procedures, absolutely delighted in people, became very comfortable with other dogs, and did some great therapy work as well as helping out at workshops (when he was not having medical problems – see next photo)



He grew up to be an extremely sweet, joyous, and resilient dog who showed no fear of anything! He was far more suited for therapy work than one piece of information from his puppyhood would suggest. He weathered the loss of an eye to unknown causes, glaucoma in his other eye, and a series of other medical issues. His nickname was Mr. Resilience.

Don't Take Anyone's Word for It

Vendors often will share what they believe about the dog in terms of breed and suitability, but even when they are well-meaning and might even be pretty good at assessing the dogs in their care, it is important to take any such claims, especially about future behavior, with a grain of salt. While the best predictor of future behavior is current behavior, I advise those seeking a dog for therapy work to find ways to observe potential canine companions and work partners as fully as possible. Having an independent and trusted canine professional who understands canine development and body language go with you to see the pup or dog can be very helpful. It is easy to fall in love with a dog who appeals to you for various reasons, and then to want to believe what you are told about the dog, but if you are hoping to work with the dog, a more thorough and independent evaluation is very helpful. Even without such assistance, it is important that you retain your own judgment and resist accepting someone else's assessment that the dog is a good therapy candidate. That is a final judgment only *you* can and should make!

Training

Some dogs have gone through “therapy dog training.” As with most things dog, this can be something very useful or it can be a marketing ploy. It behooves anyone looking for a therapy dog to ask about the nature of the training, and to observe the dog behaving in response to trained cues. It is important that training be positive in nature and does not use scolding, fear, “corrections” or aversive equipment (choke, prong, or e-collars for example). While dogs do need to learn what they may and may not do, this can be done in very dog-friendly ways. Think of what works with a 2-year-old child: Usually they respond best when we tell them what we want them to do instead of the unwanted behavior. Telling them what not to do simply doesn't compute at that age. So, too, with dogs.

It is also important to bear in mind that training can help modify some characteristics a little (not a lot), and it can help bring the dog's behavior under human control to some extent, but it can't change who the dog is. If the dog is high-energy, training can help the dog learn to relax or stay calm, but it likely won't change the energy level itself. It can help channel it, though.

When acquiring a dog from a “therapy dog training program,” it is very important to look at the methods used, what has been trained, and the extent to which the dog is allowed to be who he or she is. Some methods try to fit round pegs into square holes, and that can remove the *joie de vivre* of the dog, shutting the dog down into a more passive mode of coping. Always consider the training in

conjunction with basic personality and socialization, as well as the goodness of fit with the work you hope to do with the dog.



Training can start early, but it is important that it is a fun and positive experience for the dog. Learning needs to be fun to retain the unique and happy personality of the dog.

Individual Variation

Within any breed and any litter of dogs, there is great variation. This is why selecting therapy dogs is a complicated process. The challenge is to learn who the puppy or dog is, and how life experiences have had an impact thus far. This is then compared with the type of dog we want for our family life and for the work we do. All of the factors above play a role and suggest that careful, cautious consideration is needed. There is one more factor to consider, however, and it is perhaps the most important one of all--relationship.

Relationship, Relationship, Relationship

Just as realtors tell us it's all about location, when it comes to therapy dogs, it's all about relationship. The acquisition of the puppy or dog is just the first important step. Even when a dog has the right personality, a suitable socialization history, and some training (for good behavior and/or for therapy), the real work lies ahead-

-that of building a relationship. There is no such thing as a pre-selected and pre-trained therapy dog for this very reason. When we acquire a dog, it is up to us to build that relationship, and it is the relationship that we take with us into our therapy or educational work that affects the outcomes the most.

When we bring the dog home, it is up to us to continue the socialization and the training, but it is also up to us to build relationship by learning more and more about this unique dog through continuous observation, hanging out, playing together, caregiving, and learning how to enjoy life together. The relationships that we form with our dogs show when we are together with them. They also show during any therapy work in which we engage, and they help guide the relationships clients can form with the therapy dogs. No one can create this special bond for us—it is uniquely ours to create. This can take hard work and lots of time, but when one loves dogs, it is a labor of love.



The author and one of her therapy dogs, Kirrie, during a university presentation on Animal Assisted Play Therapy™. This depicts the mutuality of their relationship as they attend to each other. It shows the many hours of mutual sharing and caring—and playing!—that have gone into their bond. This is what we want our therapy and education clients to see. Healthy relationship and attachment need to be at the core of all AAI.

What has been written here about dogs applies, of course, to other therapy animals, such as horses, cats, pigs, goats, and others. The author has cowritten a book with Tracie Faa-Thompson, *Animal Assisted Play Therapy™*, which will be released later this year, in which they detail many of these points and focus heavily on the

role of mutually respectful and satisfying relationships with all animals involved in therapy and education work.



Author VanFleet with Kirrie and Murrie, two of her dogs who have been involved in her Animal Assisted Play Therapy™ work.

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The International Institute for Animal Assisted Play Therapy™ offers online and live training courses for those interested in the many aspects of involving animals in a voluntary way in their mental health, allied health, and education services.
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