



Newfoundland Club of America



Becoming a Therapy Dog

*by Karen Bailey
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The single most important aspect of a therapy dog is temperament, which makes it no surprise that Newfoundlands are fantastic therapy dogs. It is important when selecting your dog (whether as a puppy, adult, or a rescue) to let the breeder or rescue service know exactly what you are looking for. You want a dog that is friendly, outgoing, and confident, not overly shy or aggressive.

Once you bring your fuzzy friend home, it is time to begin training. Since therapy dogs encounter many unusual circumstances in their work, it is important, especially as a puppy, to expose them to many life experiences, making sure each new encounter is fun and positive. This can usually be accomplished with lots of treats, praise, and just plain acting silly!

Carry treats with you everywhere you go and have strangers give them to your dog, which helps to show him that people are fun and wonderful! Take him to as many places as you can, especially places with elevators, intercom systems, strange smells, and noises. Practice walking on different surfaces, such as carpet, tile, wooden walkways, and bridges. Everything is a new adventure, especially for a puppy, and it may sound funny, but just because a dog walks on carpet and tile in your home, it doesn't mean he will want to do it at a nursing home or other facility. Changes in lighting, shadows, sounds, and surroundings always make everything different from our home atmosphere. Always remember the value of treats and praise.

While you are chalking up life experiences, don't forget to enroll in obedience class. Most therapy dog programs require that a dog complete at least one formal obedience class. Many therapy dog handlers agree that most dogs will not pass a program's temperament test without some formal training.



"Temperament is the hallmark of the breed," which makes Newfoundlands ideal therapy dogs, as illustrated by Isabelle and her friends.

There are many organized therapy dog programs across the nation. Typically, these programs certify dogs as therapy dogs and facilitate their participation in animal assisted activities at schools, hospitals, nursing homes, special needs centers, assisted living centers, or any place where the dogs' presence can provide a "therapeutic contact" to those being served. In addition to certification and support, they provide education, and liability insurance.

Each group has similar steps and requirements to becoming a therapy dog, which include testing and evaluation. Most groups do not offer their own classes, but may require dogs to have completed a formal obedience class and/or to have passed a standardized test, such as the AKC Canine Good Citizen test. Health requirements usually require that dogs be current on their vaccinations as required by law and be free of internal and external parasites.

Dogs must pass a temperament test designed by the program. The test usually consists of an obedience review and may include some of the steps from a CGC test. In addition, dogs are evaluated on their reactions to sights and sounds, and sometimes pain tolerance, such as an ear or toe pinch or fur tug. Pain tolerance sounds frightening, but it is very important to see how a dog will react if, for example, someone accidentally runs over the dog's tail with a wheelchair, pets or hugs him too hard, or grabs his ear

and doesn't want to let go.

After successfully passing the temperament test, most organizations require one to three observed visits where you and your dog accompany an experienced team in real working situations. This allows you to see how everything works and to ask any questions you may have. Once you have completed the required observed visits, you will be ready to venture out on your own. Most programs have facilities lined up and ready to visit and some give you the opportunity to work at new places. Don't be afraid to try different kinds of facilities. Some places you visit will be room to room and others will be in one room with a large group of people; some will have children and others senior citizens. Your dog will let you know where he feels most comfortable, and your therapy dog group will support you and equip you with everything you need to begin changing the world as a new therapy dog team!

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