Therapy Dogs — Born or Made?
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As many of you know I recently presented a seminar on animal assisted therapy in Naples Florida. (Yes, it’ll be out as a DVD later this winter. Happy Dance!) One of the motivations for doing the seminar was the number of clients I had who wanted me to help them prepare their dog for therapy work. Sometimes it was like swimming downstream on a warm, cozy river. Their dog was a perfect fit and ended up doing wonderful work in the community. Other times... well, it was reminiscent of trying to paddle up a cold, frothy waterfall. The fact is, therapy work can be hard work, and it takes a special kind of dog to be both good at it and to enjoy it. The directors of AAA and AAT (AAAActivities and ATTherapy) will tell you that one of their greatest challenges is working with people who want to volunteer but whose dogs just don’t qualify. Here’s a summary of the characteristics of a good therapy dog prospect, in hopes it will be helpful for those who are interested in doing this wonderful work:

Affiliative: This seems like a no-brainer, but the fact is that many dogs are presented for therapy work who really don’t like strangers all that much. They love their owners and good friends, but aren’t all that interested in other people. Good therapy dogs need to be the kind of dogs who ADORE people, all people, and want nothing more than to connect with them. It is, after all, the emotional connection that is often the therapeutic part of AAA and AAT. It seems to me that dogs sort into 4 categories: 1) adore people, care little for other dogs, 2) adore dogs, care little for unfamiliar people, 3) adore members of both species and are thrilled to meet new ones and 4) adore neither dogs or people, except maybe their owner. Needless to say, only categories 1 and 3 are good therapy prospects.

Physically Calm: Many of the dogs who think all people hung the moon regrettably don’t fit into this category. Leaping, licking, pawing and body slamming just don’t work in senior centers and hospitals. This is why so many dogs don’t qualify when they are young, but could be great prospects when they are older. I wrote a chapter with Audrey Fine for his great book The Handbook of Animal Assisted Therapy, and we had a long discussion about how many dogs would be GREAT for therapy work when they are six. Or eight. Or ten, but their owners get them evaluated at the age of two, the dogs are not “passed” and their owners never try again.

Psychologically Sound and Non-reactive: It doesn’t matter how much training or conditioning you do, therapy dogs need a certain level of rock solid soundness to be good prospects. Of course, the context does matter: some dogs are great in senior centers but are uncomfortable around children and would be disasters in a children’s hospital. It’s important to remember that AAA and AAT include a vast range of experiences, so every dog must be evaluated based on what they are going to be doing. But it’s still essential to keep in mind that although your job is in part to protect your dog, once you are inside a facility you will have limited control over what happens. And what can happen (someone grabbing your dog, weird noisy medical equipment coming on, a medical crisis that results in tremendous chaos) is sometimes enough to terrify a sensitive dog.

Included in this category, although albeit somewhat different conceptually, is the state of being “emotionally mature” or able to handle frustration and deal with the world with a calm, measured demeanor. Again, just as in people, sometimes this takes several years to master.
Ridiculously clean and healthy: Unless you work in health care facilities it is easy to forget how differently sanitation needs to be handled in facilities and hospitals than it does in your own home. Pet Pals here in Madison, which organizes visits to the Children’s Hospital through the UW Vet School, requires that all dogs in the program go through extensive veterinary evaluations twice a year. This includes an entire day of testing for a vast range of diseases, from salmonella to MRSA. In this case the dogs are visiting children who are often immune compromised, and so their requirements are more stringent than some, but any facility, from a senior center to a hospital, is a very, very different place than your home. Germs love the kind of places that therapy dogs go to visit, and they can move around like wild-fire within very vulnerable populations.

Aware of their Job? This is gravy, pure gravy, but the fact is that some dogs do more than happily sit with strangers or participate in structured therapy treatment plans, as beneficial as that can be to some people. These dogs seem to sense why they are there, and seek out people who are especially needy, and make an emotional connection with them that changes their life. These connections happen, and hearing about them is enough to make you all gooey-eyed. Special stuff indeed.