

## My Dog, the Therapist

**Experienced therapy dog brings comfort a little closer to home.**

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Posted: Tue Jun 27 00:00:00 PDT 2000

My dogs have done therapy work for nearly 10 years, but this time I gained a new perspective. We were visiting my father, who was rehabilitating from a stroke. Dax, my 3-year-old Australian Shepherd, and I made an extraordinary therapy visit to a nursing home in San Diego last year. My dogs have done therapy work for nearly 10 years, but this time I gained a new perspective.

The nursing home was new to us, so Dax and I looked around carefully as we entered. When Dax saw a resident in a wheelchair, the dog snuggled right up next to her. Dax attempted to give his love and attention to everyone along the way. Everybody wanted to pet her. It took 20 minutes to reach my dad's room.

I invited Dax to get on the bed with Dad. She jumped up softly - an important skill for all therapy dogs - snuggled close and quickly realized whom she was visiting. Dax cried, whined and crawled up so she could lick his face. She wiggled and squirmed, barely able to control her excitement. Dad was happy to see both of us. He petted Dax, held her close and laughed at her enthusiasm.

Dax's visit affected dad greatly. Since the stroke, he had suffered from hiccup-like spasms that interfered with his speech, sleep and eating. When she visited, the hiccups completely stopped within 10 minutes, and he fell asleep easily. I quietly coaxed Dax from the bed and we left.

Therapy dogs improve the physical and emotional health of patients by providing affection, warmth, and positive energy. Dax is my fifth therapy dog. We regularly visit Alzheimer's residential care facilities as well as nursing homes, hospitals and children's shelters. Thousands of other therapy dogs provide love and affection to people of all ages and conditions. They often motivate patients to embrace physical therapy or inspire a traumatized child to talk to a counselor. The benefits of pet therapy appear unlimited.

Only certain dogs can be effective therapists. Personality is most important; therapy dogs must like people. Not all dogs like strangers, and therapy dogs visit strangers all the time. Sometimes people act in ways the dog isn't used to seeing; their movements might be jerky, their voices unfamiliar. A therapy dog must accept or ignore such behavior.

Size and breed are unimportant - Rottweilers, Doberman Pinschers and German Shepherd Dogs provide therapy as effectively as Poodles, Bichon Frises and Cocker Spaniels. The main difference: Large dogs stand next to a bed or chair for easy petting, while smaller dogs sit with someone or crawl up on the bed like Dax.

Want to help make a difference in someone's life? Learn about training your pet as a therapy dog. Send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to Liz Palika c/o The Foundation for Pet Provided Therapy, 3809 Plaza Dr., No. 107-309, Oceanside, CA 92056.

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