



What Type of Training Do Therapy Dogs Need?

INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR ANIMAL ASSISTED PLAY THERAPY® WEDNESDAY, MARCH 7, 2018

by Risë VanFleet, PhD, RPT-S, CDBC

I recently talked with a psychologist friend who had acquired a new dog that she wanted to prepare for work in her office. She had selected a puppy who seemed to have a well-suited temperament, and she had read about the importance of socialization and had made sure that the puppy had many positive experiences in the world. She had then arranged for her and the dog to attend training classes. During the first class, the trainer taught them to push down on their puppies' hips to force them into a sit. If the pups stood back up, the humans were to push down again and force-hold them in place. My friend's puppy began whimpering, and the trainer told her that she needed to toughen up and show the dog who was boss. My friend didn't like this and decided not to go back. She tried another trainer who advertised as using "positive" training, yet when she had her first meeting, this trainer required that the puppies wear prong (or pinch) collars.

Knowing a bit about behavior, my colleague decided that this didn't seem very positive, entailed the use of too much punishment, and decided once again not to return. She eventually found a trainer who taught puppy skills using positive reinforcement methods and who looked actively for ways to set the puppies up for success. My friend's dog became eager to learn and the fearful behaviors that had appeared with the first two

training experiences disappeared. The psychologist was delighted to have finally found a dog-friendly dog trainer.

There are still many trainers, and even some therapy dog programs, who teach the use of molding (pushing dogs into position) and use prong collars, choke chains, and even shock collars (euphemistically called e-collars). To me, these are relics of the days when we didn't understand dogs very well and didn't think clearly enough about their welfare. The same is true of scolding dogs. This is still used by some to "correct" the dog, but without a realization that by the time a person scolds, the dog has moved on to something else and is likely confused by the scolding. It takes time to shift from old approaches to new ones, and there is often resistance to this change. We know, however, that there is some serious potential fall-out from using methods that rely on punishment. Dogs can become anxious and fearful. A focus on what the dog does wrong does not teach the dog what to do right. Punitive methods rarely build a happy, relaxed relationship between human and dog, even though most people usually say that's what they want with their companion animals. With repeated punishment, dogs can become listless or even subject to learned helplessness, where the dog gives up and quits trying. All of these things interfere with learning. Many people have written books, articles, and blogs about why these methods do not provide the best training approach for dogs, so I will not dwell on those reasons here. I have worked with many troubled dogs in my role as a dog behavior consultant, and I am always sad when I see a dog who avoids people, shows signs of fear, and/or simply seems to have lost his/her zest for life. Part of my sadness comes from the fact that I know there are better, kinder ways to teach dogs and to help solve their behavior issues.



I want my dogs to have a healthy interest in the world around them rather than fearing it or feeling uncertain in it.

My purpose in writing this short article today is to share some aspects of therapy dog training that I consider of utmost importance. (Much of what I say here applies to other species involved in therapy work, too.) Perhaps surprisingly, how we teach our dogs is not only about animal welfare!

In our book released this past September, *Animal Assisted Play Therapy* (2017, Professional Resource Press), coauthor Tracie Faa-Thompson and I devote two chapters to the type of relationships between therapists and their animals that we consider to be essential. We also include ways of building and strengthening those relationships. We include a chapter that goes into detail about how one can prepare therapy dogs for the work that mental health, allied health, and education professionals do. Here I want to emphasize three aspects of the therapist-dog training approach that impact the effective, ethical inclusion of dogs in psychological practice: (1) impact on the personality and demeanor of the dogs, (2) implications for therapist relationships with their therapy assistants, and (3) impact on the clients' well-being.

Impact on the Personality and Demeanor of Potential Therapy Dogs

Imagine that you are trying to learn a new skill, such as sewing or karate or how to ride a motorcycle. Now imagine that your teacher spent a fair amount of time telling you the things that you're doing wrong. The teacher might tell you what they want you to do, but you are new at it and you fumble around a bit. The teacher then points out one mistake after another, while occasionally telling you that you did something right. What would happen to your motivation? What would happen to your excitement about learning something new? What would happen to your ability to learn easily? For most of us, I think we would become more and more self-conscious, trying hard to get it right, but realizing that we kept coming up short. Eventually, we might begin to think we are a failure and lose interest in learning this new area.

I don't think dogs are that different. They are born to learn. It's how animals survive - by learning and adapting. Dogs, having co-evolved with people for thousands of years, usually are eager to learn from their human family members. The methods we use to teach them matter. Positive approaches keep motivation high and allow dogs to keep trying without fear. Punitive approaches can create avoidance, and often do. I work with many dogs, including my own, those of my dog behavior clients, and those of therapists who are interested in involving their dogs in their work. I can usually tell how a dog has been trained by his or her demeanor. I'm a fan of positive approaches because I want therapy dogs to be well-behaved, but also to be curious, lively, interested in people, and willing to try new things. This allows the therapy to be "real," in that the dogs' behavior is natural rather than suppressed. The dog approaches people with interest and shows enjoyment in the interactions with all their body language. Clients feel pleased when dogs approach them eagerly, but politely, and so do I. The dog in the top cover photo for this article displays what I like to see. She is interested in what the client is doing and what will happen next. She is well-behaved but is curious and attentive to the client.



This is another example of a dog who is fully engaged and interested in what will happen next with the client.

Training approaches that focus on antecedent conditions (arranging things to set the dogs up for success) and the use of positive reinforcement (to let the dogs know that they are doing well so they will continue that desired behavior) help learning remain fun for both dogs and their humans. When learning is fun, the dogs show it in their demeanor as they eagerly approach new tasks.

The Impact of Training on Our Relationships with our Therapy Assistants

I often ask the therapists who attend my Animal Assisted Play Therapy™ workshops what they were hoping for when they first acquired their puppies or dogs. Almost never do I hear, “I wanted an obedient dog who would do everything I asked.” More often I hear, “I wanted a companion to have fun with, to relax with, to enjoy life with.” Essentially, I am asking about the type of relationship they wanted. Even in a study I did several years ago with a cross-section of dog owners, their focus was almost entirely on relationship and very little on control. While most people want well-behaved dogs, they do not start out the relationship wanting to control everything about the dog. They want a friendly, mutually respectful relationship.

While I do not believe that training methods are the *only* way to create relationship, they certainly have an impact. If we teach our dogs that we bring fun and good things to the learning process, they will look forward to our training sessions and to interactions with people in general. The way we train shows in our relationships with our dogs, and it is virtually impossible to behave one way with our dogs at home and another

way during therapy sessions. Training not only teaches dogs some new behaviors, it also teaches *us* as we improve our handling skills and ability to communicate with our dogs. Those abilities are ones we carry with us into the therapy room, just as our dogs do! It behooves us to interact with our dogs at all times in ways that are likely to build pleasant, mutually beneficial relationships where the genuineness of caring for each other shows in practically everything we do.

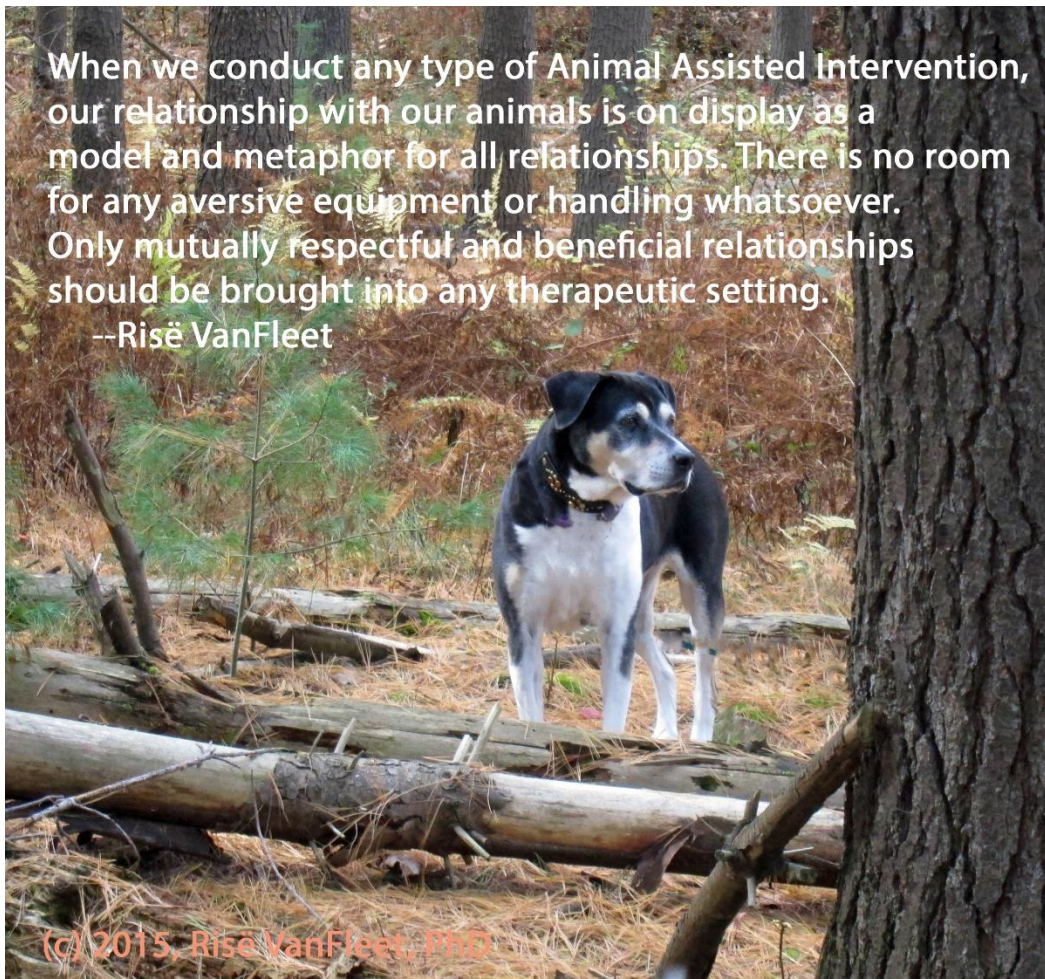


Kirrie and Murrie know that fun lies ahead! It is through consistent playful interactions that they know what to expect.

The Implications of Training Approaches for Clients' Well-Being

This naturally leads us into consideration of how the training methods used with a dog can impact the client recipients of Animal Assisted Therapy. Therapy, at its heart, is about relationships. Mental health professionals create safe and accepting environments in which clients can explore their difficulties and possible solutions to them. Change occurs in the context of relationships--the therapeutic relationship and the supportive relationships that clients can find in their lives. When therapists bring their dogs into their work, they usually anticipate some of the benefits of the relationship that can grow between client and animal. While their therapeutic approaches vary with therapists' theoretical orientations and skills (and the ways in which dogs are involved vary along with that), most practitioners recognize that the primary value of dogs' presence comes when clients create bonds with them, and through those bonds, the clients can feel better and be facilitated on their therapeutic journey. If that were not the case, why would we involve sentient beings in this work?

We have often said (VanFleet & Faa-Thompson, 2017) that the relationship that a therapist has with his or her dog provides both “a model and a metaphor” for the therapeutic relationship. I have worked with children, adolescents, and parents (families) for nearly 40 years, and I have seen over and over how acutely they observe what we as therapists do. Children, in particular, seem to notice *everything*. This suggests to me that they will also notice how our dogs behave and how *we* behave with our dogs. If the humane treatment of dogs were not enough, this fact should be. The relationship we have with our dogs is on display when we are with our clients. What does this tell our clients about what to expect in therapy? What can clients anticipate in their own relationships with us? If they do not see a warm, friendly, mutually respectful relationship on display between us and our animals, it could negatively impact the therapeutic trajectory, even if in quite subtle or unspoken ways. If what I wrote in the preceding section is true--that how we live with and teach our dogs is going to show when we work with our dogs--what message does it give our clients if we are using force- or control-oriented methods of training? This is not a risk I want to take with any of my clients. Just as we think about our office layouts or the toys in our playrooms, we must think carefully about how we are interacting with our dogs. It is all part of the therapeutic environment.



When we conduct any type of Animal Assisted Intervention, our relationship with our animals is on display as a model and metaphor for all relationships. There is no room for any aversive equipment or handling whatsoever. Only mutually respectful and beneficial relationships should be brought into any therapeutic setting.

--Risë VanFleet

(c) 2015, Risë VanFleet, PhD

This meme speaks to the potential impact of our training and relationship with our animals on our therapeutic work.

How we train and work with our dogs matters. The types of relationships we create with them on a daily basis matters. It matters to the dogs, and it matters to our clients. In the larger scheme of things, it matters to us, too, because we gain a stronger attachment with our working partners, and we benefit from that both at work and at home.

If you're interested in more depth on this topic, along with detailed information about the practice of Animal Assisted Play Therapy™ (AAPT; and AAT in general), please see VanFleet & Faa-Thompson, 2017. ***Animal Assisted Play Therapy***. Sarasota, FL: Professional Resource Press. This was released to universal acclaim from key Animal Assisted Intervention and animal welfare advocates throughout the world. www.iaapt.org.

Dr. Risë VanFleet is a licensed psychologist, registered play therapist-supervisor, and certified dog behavior consultant, with over 40 years of experience working in mental health. She has trained thousands of professionals throughout the world. She is a cofounder, with Tracie Faa-Thompson of the UK, of the International Institute for Animal Assisted Play Therapy®. She is well known for her writings and in-depth training workshops on play therapy, Filial Therapy, and AAPT. In the past 15 years, Risë and Tracie have established in-person and online training programs about the ethical and humane involvement of dogs, horses, cats, and other animals in professional therapy work. There are therapists who are certified or who are working toward certification in AAPT in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, several countries in Europe, Hong Kong, and Australia/New Zealand.

