

Purdue University Cooperative Extension Service, West Lafayette, IN 47907

## Getting Involved in Canine Assisted Therapy

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### Introduction

Did you know that there are other forms of healing besides medicine? Animals, for example, have been used for decades to help humans improve their motor skills, improve communication, deal with depression, and address other health related issues. Animal-assisted therapy involves a therapist working with a client(s) toward a specific goal or purpose by using an animal as part of the therapeutic intervention. A large variety of animals can be used for animal-assisted therapy. Dogs, cats, birds, horses, farm animals, and even fish have been used before. Each animal provides its own therapeutic benefits.

For example, horses can provide muscular stimulation because their movements are continuous and rhythmic, while fish are very relaxing. Therapy animals can be used in nursing homes, schools, facilities for people with developmental disabilities, hospitals, hospice and AIDS settings, and prisons/detention centers. This paper will describe how to get involved in animal-assisted therapy, the advantages and disadvantages of using dogs for animal-assisted therapy, and the therapeutic benefits to humans.

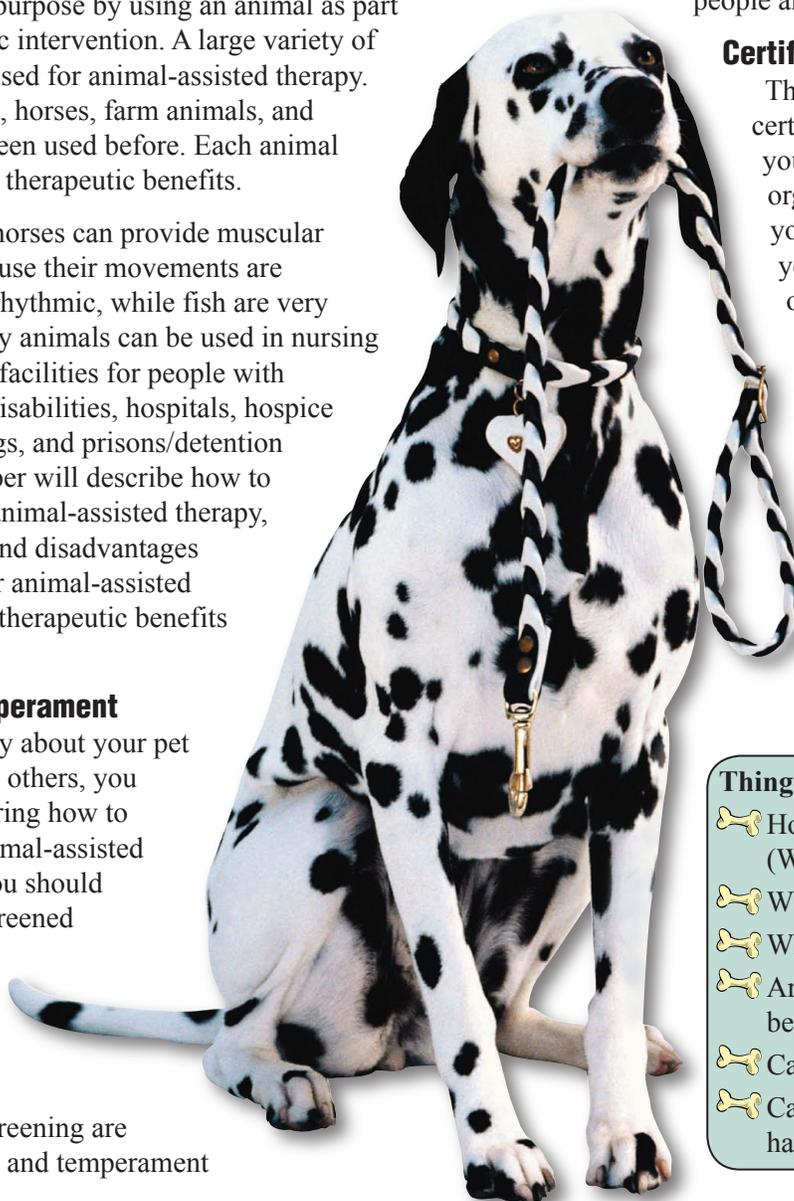
### Select for Temperament

If you are crazy about your pet and love helping others, you might be wondering how to get started in animal-assisted therapy. First, you should have your pet screened to make sure it is appropriate for therapy work. The main categories for screening are health, behavior, and temperament

of the animal. The health screening should be done by a veterinarian to ensure the safety of your clients. The animal's behavior should be fitting for the setting. A dog that barks a lot should not be brought into a nursing home or hospital. Proper behavior is usually the result of proper training. The animal needs to have a good temperament and be consistently well-mannered around new people and new settings.

### Certification

The next step after screening is to get certified. In order to become certified, you will need to contact a therapy organization. They will then direct you to evaluators located closest to you. Some of the most common organizations are the Delta Society Pet Partners Program, Therapy Dogs International, and Therapy Dogs Incorporated. Screening and certification are important because they make you more credible to prospective facilities and may provide liability insurance. This is important in case your animal accidentally injures someone. Each certifying organization has a slightly different structure for the certification process.



#### Things To Look For:

-  How long is the certification good? (When do I need to renew?)
-  What fees do I need to pay?
-  Where do I need to go to get evaluated?
-  Are there any materials I need to study before I go through the certification?
-  Can I certify more than one dog?
-  Can I certify more than one person to handle my dog?

Each certification program may have its own variations; but in general, programs will want to see that the dog is safe, mannerly, and under control at all times. They also want to be sure that you realize the importance, and have the skills, to prevent any undue stress for danger for the dog.

### Advantages of Selecting a Dog

Advantages and disadvantages exist with any type of animal you choose to work with. Dogs make excellent assistants. They are highly trainable and can perform many tasks. People generally like dogs, and most people have had a dog in their life at some time. Dogs are larger than rodents so they will not get injured as easily by people who have restricted control of their movements. They have good eye contact and are eager to participate in activities with others. You can dress dogs up during holidays and have them present gifts, which cheers up clients and gives them something to tell their friends. Clients can take dogs for a walk, which stimulates activity and is a good form of exercise.

There can be negatives to using dogs as well. Although dogs are highly trainable, it takes a lot of time and effort. Some people are allergic to dogs, some may frighten people. The dog could have a behavioral problem that is observed in a therapy setting that doesn't occur in the home environment, and some dogs bark whenever they get excited, or see something new. Dogs require regular grooming, and should always be groomed before a visit is made. Luckily, the advantages of using a dog as part of a therapeutic intervention far outweigh the disadvantages.

The benefits to humans of animal-assisted therapy are well-documented. Dogs can help people who are disoriented by catching their attention and bringing them back to what is going on around them. This same concept helps adults and children with attention-deficit problems. The dog causes them to concentrate on something and thus, strengthen that action through repetition. Dogs boost morale and help people who are suffering from depression by providing them social stimulation. Physical inactivity, loss of home or living in a facility where life is routine can all lead to depression. Dogs help fulfill the need for touch, which may be absent in some facilities. The dog, through its



unconditional acceptance of the patient, can also provide social validation, especially for patients whose physical state may be off-putting to other visitors.

In the book, *Hospice Hounds*, Michelle Rivera tells of an encounter she had with an elderly man in hospice care. This man was gravely ill and could not eat because of side effects of his illness. When she first went into the room, the gentleman did not seem to be much of an animal person. After a few minutes, the man asked if the dog could eat; what it could eat; and who would help it if it was unable to eat. This man felt such a bond with the dog that he became very concerned for it and even projected his own troubles onto it.

### Conclusion

You can choose to work with dogs, cats, horses, or a variety of other animals. Remember, it is important to ensure that the animal is treated with respect and care when it is used therapeutically. If the dog involved in the therapy is distressed by the intervention, it should be removed from the situation, and reevaluated. The screening and certification processes are very important.

Remember to contact a therapy organization to find the evaluators closest to you, and to get certified before you begin making visits.

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