

## **Course Outline**

The Therapy Dog training course involves at least three group field trips, and several weeks of "in-school" acclimation and desensitizing. The number of in-school classes is adjusted to the needs of the group. All field trips are planned in advance, with permission from the management of the facility we intend to visit. We carefully explain what the group is trying to accomplish, and are usually given carte blanche after a few test runs. Our field trips involve visits to places such as:

- shopping centers (which would include shopping carts, escalators and possibly people on crutches and wheel chairs)
- public access buildings which would allow us use of their elevators
- restaurants during dead time (which will allow us to give the dogs access to food and people in an unfamiliar atmosphere. This is because many nursing homes allow food in the rooms and rec. areas, and the dogs need to know how to behave around it)
- downtown, or a busy foot and car traffic spot to let the dogs get used to noises and bustle.
- hospitals and nursing homes with geriatric, but non Alzheimer patients (the last visit before qualification) We usually take field trips in groups of 3 or 4 people. The reason for this should be fairly obvious. The less dogs there are, the more control can be had over a given situation. Of course, once a group has become inured to stressful situations, adjustments can be made.

In-school acclimatization and desensitizing can be accomplished in a variety of ways. Here I will attempt to relate some of our methods. All classes last about 1 to 1 1/2 hour for each session.

One of the students at our school happens to be confined to a motorized wheel chair. During the duration of one class, we recruit her to handle each of our dogs, one at a time, in heel position, on a loose lead, and approaching and leaving from the rear of the dog. The dog owner's assistance is of course needed, but this exercise allows the dogs a non threatening introduction to the sound and motion of the chair, as well as being exposed for the full length of a class to a new object. When not being handled by the person in the chair, the dog is walked around the room and near the chair occasionally

Another class requires the assistance of several persons not actually taking the class. These people enter the classroom on crutches and walkers. They simply walk around the dogs as we conduct our usual routine for that session. The usual routine would include standing for exams, walking on loose leads with distractions (the crutches!), handling by a stranger (checking teeth, ears and grooming) and down stays with the owner in sight. The dogs' steadiness and reliability is put to the test in this exercise.

The point of these tests is not pass/fail, they allow the handler to understand the flexibility and range to which their dog is able to tolerate new challenges. The exception would be a dog who snaps, growls or bites of course, this dog would prove unfit for this work, and not be allowed to complete the course.

We also try to obtain an item which makes the same whistling / clapping sound as a respirator. Several nursing homes allow us to bring the dogs into an empty room with a respirator running. If this is not possible for you, try to improvise. That particular sound seems to be one that takes practice for most dogs to tolerate.

About 1/2 of a class session is devoted to drilling on the normal CGC requirements. This includes dogs being left alone, loud noises behind the dog, reactions to distractions, and reactions to loud exchanges. With any distraction we use, we try to emulate actual nursing home conditions. Bedpans and walkers are very loud when dropped near the dog. The dog must be allowed to examine the item after his reaction, and reassured. A folded wheelchair is also very loud, and safe if done at a distance. Remember, when you are in a nursing home or hospital, you must expect the unexpected.

That same class session, what is left of it, can be used to test the sociability of the class as a unit. This exercise is best conducted after the dogs have been around each other for a short period of time, to reduce the excitement factor. Each dog owner approaches another handler and carries on a short conversation. During the chat, the dogs must not touch or approach each other, but sit, lie or stand quietly by the handler's side until the visit is over. Dogs who display excitement in this exercise require more drilling in groups before being allowed to work in a group setting. Many times more than one dog is present in a therapy group, therefore a responsible owner must be aware of the reaction of their dog to others, and know if it is necessary to do therapy sessions alone with their dog.

A final classroom session is devoted to preparing the students for conditions they may encounter in a nursing home and/or hospital setting. This is a very important class. We generally try to find as Speaker an activities director from a nursing home or hospital, one that is well versed in explaining to lay persons the many problems and needs of residents. Some situations that may arise such as "grabby" patients, or patients that yell and flail about, must be explained to new therapy students. Preparation for these situations eases the discomfort and awkwardness for many people prior to exposure

The final Field Trip is usually to a nursing home as a group for a real Therapy Visit. We try to coordinate with the activities director previously consulted, in an effort to make the students more comfortable. The students are broken down into groups of three, each group visiting its' own area. There must be a supervisor with each group. If this proves difficult, we make several different appointments and stagger the visits. After all the students have completed a visit successfully, we then schedule the SK9S modified CGC test