

Pets Over Pills: Therapy Dogs Help People By Doing What They Do Best

aplus.com/a/Therapy-Dogs-Help-People-By-Doing-What-They-Do-Best

Daniel Krieger



On a recent Saturday morning on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, a group of dog owners were singing happy birthday to their dogs, who sat patiently listening, looking up and perhaps wondering what all the fuss was about. It wasn't anyone's birthday. They were taking part in a therapy dog training class held at 75th And Paws, a cosy dog day care facility. "This is serious fun," said the teacher, Michele Siegel, who was having the handlers practice multi-tasking by paying close attention to the actions of their dogs, who were told to stay put, while singing. Then each dog got a little treat.

Therapy dogs are trained along with their handlers to give comfort to people who need it in a wide array of venues, including nursing homes, hospitals, schools, disaster sites, courthouses, wherever they can work their magic. The practice dates back to the mid-1970s when Elaine Smith, a nurse, came up with the idea to train dogs for this. Interacting with dogs, as well as many other pets, has numerous positive effects like reducing stress, lowering blood pressure, and elevating mood. It's caught on and now there are therapy animal programs all over the world.

Michele Siegel's class is among the educational programs offered by [New York Therapy Animals](#), an affiliate of [Intermountain Therapy Animals](#), or ITA, a nonprofit based in Salt Lake City that provides all manner of animal-assisted therapy not only with dogs but also cats, goats, bunnies, domestic rats, chickens, cows and more.

"The goal of the class," said Siegel, a certified dog therapy (and dog) trainer for over 20 years, "is for the dogs to have the skills necessary to make people feel comfortable around them at the facilities." To qualify, a handler/dog "team" must attend her six-session course, Go Say Hi, as well as a lecture for handlers,

followed by a final evaluation performed by Siegel. If the team passes, it gets registered to go on visits.

The class is run boot-camp style to prepare teams for the challenges they might encounter, with Siegel screening out those that aren't a good fit, which is rare. "They'll be prepared for everything by the time we get done with them," she said, and though they pay for the class, students can come back as they need to brush up on their skills for free.



Michele Siegel rewarding Jonathan, a Pomeranian puppy, after an exercise at a recent therapy dog training class at 75th And Paws on the Upper East Side. Daniel Krieger

The training is geared toward developing obedience and the ability to focus in an unpredictable and chaotic environment. For instance, she had the teams walk around the room, having the dogs sit and stand as they made their way to simulate walking through a health facility or library. Then "distraction training," in which Siegel made noises like "bow wow" and engaged the handlers, whose task was to observe their dogs' reactions. Being the fourth class of six, a lot of them did pretty well. At one point, she

had handlers gently grab their dogs' tails in a kind of stress test to show them that nothing bad will happen. She also did a "mock visit," having someone walk around the room to greet and pet each dog to accustom them to being approached by strangers. The handlers have to learn to read their dogs well to pick up subtle signs of distress and make sure they are comfortable.

Dogs who did what they were told got rewarded with tiny bits of turkey or cheese. "They all sell themselves for food," Siegel told the class. Much of the training overlaps with basic puppy obedience and socialization along with practical tips, like telling strangers where your dog likes to be petted and keeping your hand on your dog's collar when someone gets close to maintain control in case something goes wrong, like a patient giving a pill to a dog, which has happened, or a dog feeling threatened. "You're their advocate," she said repeatedly, "always know what the dog is doing." (One growl while at a facility, and they're out of the program.)

Just about everyone in attendance said that they got into this to share their dogs' love with those who might benefit from it. Catherine Stieglitz, a social worker, has big plans for Chucky, her two-year-old Chihuahua/Terrier mix who is friendly, curious and gung ho. "I do a lot of work helping people during the day," she said. "I also love dogs, and so I really believe in helping people with dogs." Stieglitz would like to work with children, at a school or hospital, though that will depend on how Chucky feels about it. (Siegel offers guidance when it comes to figuring out the best venues for teams.)



Elizabeth Albuquerque and Taz, her Norfolk Terrier, at 75th And Paws. Daniel Krieger

Another recently-graduated team, Elizabeth Albuquerque and Taz, a one-year-old Norfolk Terrier, had come by for practice. They'd already earned their registration card and will be going on visits soon. Albuquerque has been practicing a lot with Taz, who is laid-back, affectionate and eager to please, ideal therapy dog qualities. "I want to share the joy she brings me with everyone else," she said. "She was put on this earth to make people happy, starting with me and then spreading it to others."

Thanks to the class, Taz is now more responsive to commands and is on solid footing with the basics. Albuquerque wants to visit hospitals and take part in a program in which children read to dogs, called Reading Education Assistance Dogs, or R.E.A.D.® As a kindergarten teacher, she would like to bring Taz after school to help her students as well as going to other schools and libraries.

Nancy George-Michalson, the director of programs and education for New York Therapy Animals, has taken part in R.E.A.D. with her toy poodle, Callie, for a decade and also coordinates the New York affiliate

of R.E.A.D. Launched in 1999 by ITA and now offered all around the country and the world, it's the first literacy support program that has children read to dogs.



Nancy George-Michalson and her apricot toy poodle, Callie, as they listen to a girl read at a library in New York City. Courtesy Nancy George-Michalson

Reading to dogs helps children relax, especially those facing difficulties, as they move at their own pace without being judged. A session lasts an hour, with about 15 minutes per child, one-on-one. This can improve reading skills, which teachers have documented as well as studies such as [one conducted by UC Davis](#) that found children in canine-assisted reading programs improved reading fluency by 12 to 30 percent. The approach can also increase kids' self-esteem and get them more engaged in reading and school itself. "This program is miraculous," said George-Michalson, who along with Siegel runs monthly workshops to train teams to do it.

George-Michalson has gotten numerous testimonials about the value of the program, like from a school guidance counselor in East Harlem who uses R.E.A.D. with children who have speech and language problems or attention disorders and read below grade level. "I've been so happy to see my students with ADHD sit calmly for 20 minutes and focus on a book," the guidance counselor said. "One of my students who stutters when he gets nervous is able to read a book with Margaret and Murphy [the dog] without stuttering, and his face lights up every time he pronounces a difficult word correctly and gets a high five from Margaret."

George-Michalson oversees and mentors more than 60 local therapy dog teams who get placed in over 100 venues, including Ronald McDonald House New York and the Lighthouse Guild Child Development

Center as well as numerous hospitals and schools, including one for kids on the autism spectrum and local colleges that host therapy dog teams at exam time to help students cope with stress. She makes all the arrangements and typically accompanies a team on their first few visits, which start off at about 30 minutes and can go up to two hours max. "I'm a mother hen," she said. "I look after our teams." She and Siegel work together closely to make sure every pair they send out has the skills and support they need.

"Both ends of the leash have to be good," added Siegel, who recounted how she first got a dog over two decades ago, which set her on the path of therapy dog work, her life's great passion.

After suffering a string of devastating losses in her family, Siegel went to a doctor to get medication to calm her nerves. Instead, the doctor prescribed a dog. "I wanted valium myself," she said, "but he chose a pet over pills."

Cover image of Tracy Sutherland with Louie, her Yorkshire Terrier, at 75th And Paws, by Daniel Krieger.