



What Makes a Person and Animal Suitable to be an ITA Volunteer Therapy Team?

We look for very specific qualities in the people and their companion animals who will qualify as ITA associate therapy teams. Pet owners who are considering this kind of service should read the following with great care and consideration because, while this manner of volunteering can be extremely valuable and rewarding, it is not enjoyable or appropriate for every person or every animal.

IMPORTANT—Qualifying Ages

For Humans: Please note that as of January 1, 2018, all ITA human volunteers must be at least **16 years of age**.

For Animals: Please note that ***your dog must be at least 18 months and under 10 years of age*** to qualify for the initial screening. Cats must be at least one year old; pocket pets like guinea pigs must be at least six months old. If you have rescued/adopted your animal, ***you must have lived with it for a minimum of six months*** before you may test to be an ITA Associate Therapy Team.

Also, please note that as of June 1, 2017, ***we no longer accept service, assistance or emotional support animals*** for therapy work. We are committed to the wellbeing of both animals and people, and we feel that it is asking too much of any dog to subject him or her to the stress and emotional pressure of more than one of these challenging and all-consuming jobs.

What Qualities Does a PERSON Demonstrate as Part of a Successful Team?

Providing animal-assisted interactions (AAI) is a *human health and social service*. It is not a sport or competition, and being a therapy dog is not a title to accrue. As such, your role in the process is extremely important. It is not a simple, casual or stress-free kind of volunteering; many liken it to a para-profession, and you will often be “alone” (meaning, no group of ITA colleagues together, all doing similar things) with patients. You will need to be brave, steady, direct, confident, emotionally mature and flexible, among other qualities.

- We look for people who demonstrate good social skills, who can smile and relax and relate comfortably with their animal companion and with other people. And, as stated above, **you need to be at least 16 years old**.
- We also observe your relationship with your animal—how well do you know this animal, its personality and its needs? How does the animal feel about you—does it respond to your cues and requests? How do you make corrections (tone, style, etc.)?
- We look for things that will be pertinent when you do AAA/AAT visits—such as, are you on time? Did you prepare carefully by reading the material you received? Did you come to the test properly prepared? Are you willing to ask questions when you don’t understand something? Are you able to listen more than you talk? Follow instructions?

Consider your willingness, ability and comfort level regarding the following:

- Do you truly enjoy making conversation with strangers, extending yourself in often difficult moments?
- Are you an exceptional listener? Most people rate their own listening skills as average at best. Animal-assisted therapy handlers need to be GREAT listeners, able to empathize and support people who are going through the toughest moments of their lives.
- Will you be comfortable saying no when a therapist or patient/client asks you to do something that you know will not be safe or comfortable for your animal?
- Will you be comfortable with the often unpleasant situations surrounding various therapies—such as strong bodily odors, people in pain, people demonstrating angry or unpredictable behaviors?
- Will you be willing to invest your time to learn about the various patient populations you will be working with, such as adults with Alzheimer’s, children with autism, people dealing with mental illnesses or profound physical damage?
- Do your life circumstances permit you to be committed to this volunteering? It cannot be slap-dash, occasional, or casual, because patients will be depending on you and your animal.

What Kinds of Animals Will Qualify?

Besides dogs and cats, there are many other domesticated species that make wonderful visiting animals and can form strong human-animal bonds. To name just a few: birds, rabbits, goats, domestic rats, hamsters, guinea pigs, ducks and chickens, miniature pigs, llamas, cows and horses.

At this time, Intermountain Therapy Animals specializes in animals that are easily “portable” for taking into healthcare institutions. **Animals such as snakes, ferrets, lizards, and wild or exotic animals are not accepted.** This is because wild or exotic animals are not legally acceptable as pets in many states, and without more research documenting their predictability over time, we cannot accurately evaluate their behavior and reaction to stress. Finally, **we do not accept service, assistance or emotional support animals, or dogs who have had any training in bite work (for sport or protection).** Please ask us for more information if these are issues that affect you and your animal.

What Makes an Animal Appropriate?

Animals should have excellent training so that they are reliable and under control even in crowded situations and when there are loud noises. For dogs, a basic obedience class is a must. Potential therapy animals must be calm, well-behaved and have excellent manners. It is also important that animals who participate in AAA/AAT are people-oriented and enjoy visiting so that they will be happy volunteering with you. Read the following checklist carefully for details about what makes an animal appropriate for AAA/AAT:

- **Interested in others and actively solicits interactions with new people:** Outgoing, friendly and confident in new settings, and accepting and forgiving of differences in people’s reactions and behavior
- Demonstrates behavior that is reliable, controllable, predictable, and INSPIRES CONFIDENCE in the person s/he is interacting with
- Demonstrates relaxed body posture, moments of sustained eye contact (dependent upon species and breed), and relaxed facial expressions
- More people-oriented than animal-oriented
- Enjoys being petted, touched and hugged
- Able to remain calm with people doing such things as speaking loudly, moving clumsily and clapping
- When approached from the rear, the animal may show curiosity, but does not startle, growl, jump up, bark, eliminate, act shy or resentful
- Can walk on various surfaces reasonably comfortably, including carpet, concrete or asphalt, tile, linoleum, rubber matting and wooden floors

What Kinds of Animals Definitely Will NOT Qualify?

- Any pet that is too energetic and rambunctious, or aggressive to people or other animals, will not pass the tests. Growling, snapping, lunging, extended barking, raising of hackles, or baring of teeth will disqualify a dog. Sometimes we meet owners who tell us, when their dog starts to growl, that “he’s just talking,” or “that’s just his way to say hello.” Even if that’s true, it doesn’t work to have an animal in school and hospital settings, with people who are sick and perhaps frightened or even tentative about meeting a dog, to have to recoil in fear. Again, any dog trained in bite work, whether for sport or protection, is not eligible for our programs.
- If your pet is in poor health it would not be safe for it or the people s/he meets to be exposed. We visit in situations where clients are medically very fragile, and therapy animals must be picture-perfect in both health and grooming. Animals who are dusty, greasy or stinky do not appeal to clients.
- If your animal is unpredictable (sweet one moment, aggressive the next) or doesn’t like being around people (shy, backs away, gets nervous, quivers, etc.) it would not be suitable.
- We do not accept any dogs who are wolf hybrids, even though many may be wonderful companions, again because they can be unpredictable.
- It is very important for your pet to live inside as a member of your family. Dogs who spend most of their lives outdoors, especially if they sleep outside and/or are kept chained most of the time, do not make good therapy animals. Dogs who are calm, well behaved, well socialized members of their pack are most successful as therapy dogs.





What, Precisely, Will You and Your Animal Have to Do During the Team Test?

IMPORTANT: Throughout the team test, you must be supportive and encouraging to your animal, and interactive with your animal and the “patient.” For you, the entire test is a role-play. *All test items must be passed satisfactorily.*

Team Skills & Relationship:

Does your animal look to you for guidance? Trust you? Respond to you? Do you relate to your animal with kindness and positive directions?

- Your dog must be interested in and accepting of a friendly stranger and be willing to sit politely for petting. Must also be clean, healthy and well-groomed.
- Your dog must be willing to go “out for a walk” with you on a loose lead—no pulling or dragging! Then you must both walk through a crowd, also on a loose leash, and be subjected to visual and noise distractions without your dog panicking, becoming aggressive, frightened, or too submissive.
- Basic obedience: your dog will have to do a sit, a down, a stay-in-place, and a come-when-called. It must also be able to meet a neutral dog with perfect manners (i.e., not vocalizing or approaching without your permission).
- Your dog must not object to a thorough, all-over handling by a stranger (fingers in mouth, on tail, feet, etc.); and to receiving a restraining hug.

Visiting Scenarios:

Generally, these items relate to people, equipment and situations that you and your animal may encounter while doing therapy visits:

- a staggering, gesturing individual;
- angry yelling going on nearby
- crowded petting by several people at once;
- exposure to a person moaning in pain, to unusual headgear, to a walker, etc.
- ability to ignore a treat and a toy at your request
- ability/willingness for the animal to take a treat gently
- ability/willingness for the animal to stay for 3-4 minute with a stranger while you leave the room

This test assesses overall sociability and observes carefully how much you and your dog are enjoying this sort of activity. We never advocate forcing our animal companions to participate in therapy/visiting situations if they do not truly enjoy it.

These test items are designed primarily for dog teams. If you have another kind of animal companion, there will be some variation in the procedures to accommodate species differences. If you have questions or feel unsure after reading this information, please feel free to call and ask for more detailed responses.

Thanks for your interest! Animal-assisted interactions are a concept whose time has come, and if you and your companion animal both decide to join us in doing this work, you will have much joy ahead of you.

