



# THE RISK OBSERVER

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## EVALUATING THE PROGRAM ELEMENTS

Program considerations that are important factors to think about when planning to introduce a therapy dog program include:

- The activities and interactions that are anticipated with the students.
- The demographics of the population expected to be exposed to the therapy dog.
- The number of students expected to be scheduled for dog therapy participation in any one session.
- Length and number of sessions per day or week.
- Identification and notification of students and teachers who may have allergic reactions, or a fear of dogs.
- Design and layout of the space provided for the dog and handler.
- Routes of access into and out of the building in relationship to student and traffic flow.
- Individuals responsible for daily grooming, feeding, and health issues.
- Securing the dog, and provision for outside rest breaks.
- Responsibilities for cleaning up the area used by the dog.
- Plans to evaluate and respond to the dog if showing signs of stress.
- Emergency communication plan.

## EVALUATING THE DOG

When choosing a therapy dog, the dog should be relatively calm, interact well with people of all age groups, and **not** exhibit any uncontrolled jumping or running behaviors.

- **Breed** - due to personality traits, Retrievers, Greyhounds, Collies and Newfoundlands are some of the more popular breeds.
- **Size** - when dealing with younger children, there may be fears of large dogs. As well, smaller dogs need to be handled in a very gentle manner.
- **Health** - The dog being considered should be in good physical health, with updated vaccination records, and negative fecal and heartworm exams.



NEW YORK STATE SAFETY GROUP 491

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- **Grooming** - Therapy dogs should be well groomed: clipped nails, free of parasites, bathed often, and lacking ear and eye discharge.
- **Temperament** - The dog needs to have a stable temperament with no signs of aggression towards people and other animals. Dogs should be able to tolerate loud noises such as yelling, as well as sudden movements.

Stress is a common occurrence for both humans and for even the most relaxed therapy dogs. According to Linda Hume, LPN, AFT Specialist for the Northeast Rehabilitation Hospital, there are several signs to look for to tell if your dog is becoming stressed:

- Excessive panting
- Whining/barking
- Tail tucked under
- Ears back
- Disinterest
- Excessive water drinking
- High speed, small amplitude vibration at tip of tail vs. tail wag
- Excessive licking
- Willful disobedience
- Leaving sweaty paw prints
- Clinging to handler

If the dog is displaying signs of stress, it is time to end the visit and allow the dog to relax. Handlers must keep a positive and happy attitude with their dog since the dogs are very in-tune with their trainers' moods, and can pick up on stress trainers are feeling. It is also important to give the therapy dog adequate time to play and to be a dog.

## PARENTAL NOTIFICATION

It is very important to inform the parents and students of a therapy dog program. Students and teachers may have severe allergic reactions to certain types of dogs, and possibly have a fear of dogs. Advance notification of a program should be communicated and alternatives provided for those who do not want to participate in the program. Forms should be distributed in advance and signed consent and waivers provided prior to participation.



NEW YORK STATE SAFETY GROUP 491

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The following organizations have websites which can be very helpful in answering questions as they arise, or to find a qualified therapy dog team:

- **International Association of Canine Professionals**, [www.dogpro.org](http://www.dogpro.org)
- **Therapy Dogs International**, [www.tdi-dog.org/index.html](http://www.tdi-dog.org/index.html)
- **Canine Good Citizens Program of the American Kennel Club**, [www.akc.org](http://www.akc.org)
- **Delta Society**, [www.deltasociety.org](http://www.deltasociety.org)

## SOURCES:

- [www.northeastrehab.com](http://www.northeastrehab.com)
- [www.cofc.edu/~huntc/service.html](http://www.cofc.edu/~huntc/service.html)
- [www.dogpro.org](http://www.dogpro.org)



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