

# Prevention<sup>®</sup>

## Is Your Pooch Therapy Dog Material?

Calling Dr. Dog! Can your pooch bring joy to people in need?

By [Karen Jones](#)



Ray Ward will never forget the call he got from the family of a cancer patient named Jackie, whom he and his late therapy dog, Mandy, had visited for years. Jackie was so bonded to Mandy that she adopted her “as a four-legged granddaughter,” says Ward. The family asked if Ward and his dog could race to the hospital—Jackie was dying. By the time they arrived, she was comatose. “But as soon as Mandy’s toenails hit the floor, Jackie woke up,” says Ward, an instructor for Pet Partners, an organization that registers therapy dog teams.

After her joyous reunion with Jackie, Mandy walked over to each family member to be petted. “Everyone was in tears,” says Ward. “Mandy just knew that was the right thing to do.” Though Jackie passed away 24 hours later, Mandy gave the gift of love when it mattered most. “This work is as good for the owners as it is for the patients,” says Ward. “And I get my own therapy dog, 24/7.”

Therapy dogs and their owners volunteer wherever comfort is needed—nursing homes, hospitals, libraries, and disaster relief centers. Sometimes the dogs heal by example. Take Dutchess, a dog with a special gift: She knows when someone needs her. Undeterred by her blindness, Dutchess and owner Mark Condon, PhD, comfort people with autism.

“It’s impossible to be in a bad mood around Dutchess,” says Dr. Condon, president of Canine Link Therapy Dogs in Ancram, NY. “She defuses negative energy—that makes her a great therapy dog.”

For people with autism, therapy dogs provide “a grounding presence,” says Dr. Condon. For example, having to ask to pet Dutchess encourages communication skills. “It’s a big step for people with autism to initiate interaction, and they all want to interact with Dutchess,” he says.

### It’s Good for You, Too

“Petting and walking a pet can decrease blood pressure—not only yours but also your pet’s,” says Aubrey Fine, EdD, editor of *The Handbook on Animal Assisted Therapy*. And it’s deeply touching to share your pet with someone in need, he says.

## Getting Started

Determine your dog's suitability, says Mary Margaret Callahan, national director of program development for Pet Partners. Obedience skills and a calm temperament are essentials. Your dog can't bark at people, jump on them, or pull on the leash. He must be relaxed when a stranger pets him and unfazed by noises and smells.

Ask yourself, *Am I willing to interact with people in need? Can I deal with people in discomfort?*

Also ask, *Can I follow a facility's rules?* If you can answer yes to each question, you're on your way.

## Training

Some organizations train both dogs and owners; others train owners only. Look for an accredited organization with standards and procedures to protect you and your dog. This includes liability insurance, visit-length rules so your pet isn't overworked, infection control, and regular health screenings for your pet.

Training length varies. Some organizers offer online courses that can be completed in a certain amount of hours; others require teams to train together for weeks. Registration should require inperson team testing.

Typically, training and registration will set you back around \$100 to \$300. Once you've graduated, your training organization may help you find facilities to visit, but be prepared to do your own research and coordinate with staff for visitation. Finally, be prepared to commit to a schedule of regular visits.

Find training here:

- [Pet Partners](#)
- [Canine Link](#)
- [Therapy Dogs Inc.](#)
- [Good Dog Foundation](#)
- [Therapy Dogs International](#)

*For more information on Dr. Condon and Dutchess (and their children's book, A Day with Dutchess: Life Lessons from a Blind Therapy Dog), visit [dutchesstherapydog.com](http://dutchesstherapydog.com).*

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