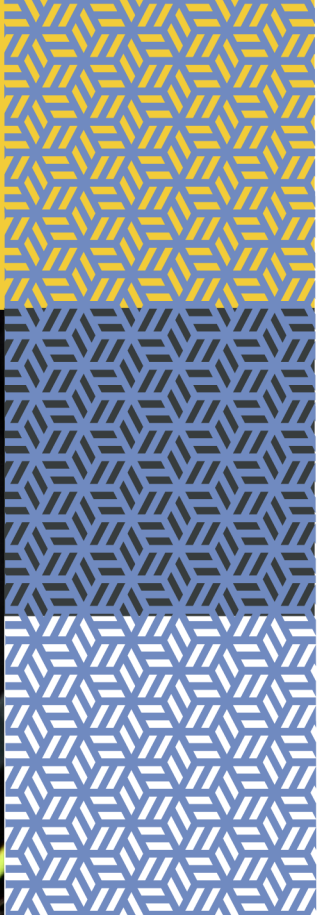
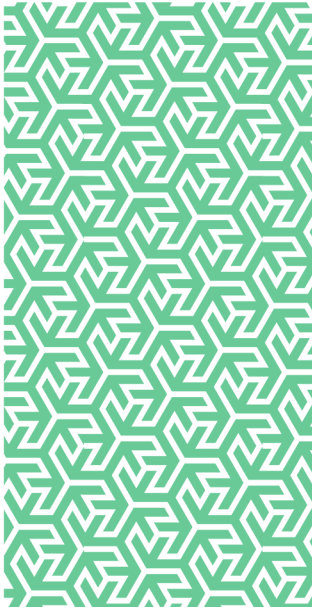


rmp

## Risk control

Assistance Dogs,  
Service Dogs and  
Puppy Therapy



In partnership with



# Assistance Dogs, Service Dogs and Puppy Therapy

## Introduction

In the 1700's the Quakers understood that the presence of pets could promote social interaction and reduce psychological responses to anxiety. They ran a retreat<sup>1</sup> for people suffering from mental health issues and began to introduce animals to "enhance the humanity of the emotionally ill" patients who lived there.

The use of animals in therapeutic support has been well documented over recent years<sup>2</sup>. Research has found that stroking a pet can offer psychological benefits as it can be relaxing and result in a reduction in blood pressure. Their use has been successfully introduced in different settings including residential care homes, schools and hospitals.

## Mental Health and Wellbeing

The concern about mental health in the workplace has been identified in the fact that stress, depression and anxiety are a significant issue within UK industry. According to the Health and Safety Executive<sup>3</sup> 875,000 workers were suffering from work-related stress, depression or anxiety (new and long-standing) in 2022/23. This resulted in 17.1 million working days being lost.

Employers are required to consider the occupational health as well as the safety of their employees. The concern for education providers also extends to their student populations.

## History of Pet Therapy

There are several national charities that provide therapy dogs and therapy events in different settings. One national charity<sup>4</sup> was established forty years ago and provides a network of volunteers who provide such a service. Puppy therapy is the most recent way to promote the use of therapy dogs.

## Assistance / Service / Therapy Dogs

Assistance or service dogs are provided to someone with at least one disability or illness that affects daily activity. The service dog is provided to support a person's life or job. The illnesses and disabilities would be diagnosed by medical professionals. Service dogs<sup>5</sup> can improve the health and quality of life for their owners and there are nine types of service dogs:

- Guide
- Hearing
- Seizure alert and response
- Diabetic alert
- Allergy detection

- Mobility assistance
- Autism service
- Psychiatric service
- Therapy

The service dogs undergo rigorous training and serve their handlers in different locations. The dogs are trained to overcome lots of difficulties and restrict their eagerness to play or rest when working for humans.

## Puppy Therapy Benefits

Time out to do something calming can have very positive mental health benefits. It can encourage employees and students to take a break from their desks and deadlines, clearing their heads. The opportunity to interact with a puppy is also an attractive option.

The Mental Health Foundation<sup>6</sup> states that just by stroking, sitting with or playing with an animal, people are given a chance to relax and calm their mind.

## Identification

There is no register or certification process for assistance dogs in the UK. Organisations such as Guide Dogs UK issue an Assistance Dogs (UK) Identification booklet<sup>7</sup>, however, not all assistance dog owners have papers or formal identification, nor are they required to have these things by law.

The dog handler, typically a volunteer, must be registered with a recognised charitable organisation and have had local security checks and a DBS check based on the areas they are visiting.

## Preparing for a Visit

The responsibilities for a visit rest with both the handler of the dog and the host organisation. The Royal College of Nursing has well developed advice and guidance developed for visits in higher risk clinical<sup>8</sup> environments. These principles are distilled into the checklist below applicable for most environments.

## The Handler's Checklist

- The dog should be washed and well-groomed before any visit
- The dog must not be fed on raw animal protein: fish, meat or eggs
- If the owner / handler or animal are unwell with diarrhoea and vomiting or have had diarrhoea and vomiting in the last 48 hours, they must not visit. This also applies to respiratory symptoms such as a cough and cold. Any change in stool

habit for the therapy dog should be considered and an appropriate time frame of 48 hours after any episode prior to returning to visiting

- If the handler or animal develops a skin condition, advice must be sought from a medical practitioner as to whether the owner / handler and dog should visit the proposed setting
- Owners should be able to provide evidence of parasite prevention in the form of a written record
- The therapy dog must be up to date with all relevant vaccinations including DHP, leptospirosis and kennel cough with certificates held and recorded. Visits to environments must be limited for one week after the administration of any live vaccines and this includes the kennel cough vaccine which is live
- The dog must be free of communicable diseases, parasites and external infestations, ringworm or skin disorders, e.g. mange
- The therapy dog must have no open wounds
- During the visit, the therapy dog should be on a lead and under control at all times
- The therapy dog should wear ID tag and some kind of item that recognises them as a therapy pet (e.g. jacket, harness, etc.)
- The dog should never be left alone with anyone other than the handler and the handler should always be supported by a host member of staff appropriate to the area
- The handler must be able to remove a dog from any stressful / risky situation and be able to read the dog's body language to understand when the dog is uncomfortable. The handler must be able to terminate a visit (without question) immediately should they indicate that the dog needs removing
- The time a therapy dog is working should be limited to one hour, with a max of three hours working a day, with breaks between for rest and recuperation. It is the handler's responsibility to recognise and respond to the dog's needs

### The Host's Checklist

- Check before a visit to ensure the participant group does not contain a person with known allergies that the therapy dog could trigger or a history of asthma. A person may have an allergy to either the hair, skin or dander of a dog and a visit would not be appropriate
- Gaining consent from the participants

- Ensure there are no open wounds that may come into contact with the pet, all wounds must be dressed appropriately
- The visit must be pre-arranged between the handler and the venue so risk assessments and appropriate arrangements can be made to ensure the wellbeing of all concerned
- Ensure any equipment touched by the therapy dog is cleaned after the visit
- Encourage the person to clean their hands before and after interaction, and ensure that the handler performs good hand hygiene
- The host is responsible for the health and safety of the participants at all times and the participants must not be left unattended with the therapy dog
- The host keeps records of the participants who have interacted with the therapy dog and ensure that this information is available for infection control

### Joint Responsibilities Checklist

- The therapy dog must not be allowed to lick anyone
- Both the animal and their owner / handler must have all their routine vaccinations and these must be up to date in accordance with the manufacturer's guidelines
- Hand hygiene is to be maintained. The owner / handler, the participants and anyone who has contact with the dog must clean their hands with soap and water, sanitiser or alcohol rub
- The host will raise any concerns and issues that arise from therapy interactions with the handler

### The Risks

The health and safety policies of both the host and the service provider that the owner / handler represents (if any) should be followed.

Allergy management must also be considered. Allergies to dogs are common and dog allergen can be found in public places, being carried on the clothing of pet owners and pet contacts. The dog dander is present in the fur, skin and saliva. As dogs groom themselves the saliva remains on the fur until it dries and forms into a powder, which can then become airborne and inhaled.

Before an assistance or therapy dog is brought into your organisation, the host organising the visit should be consulted to establish whether there are individuals present with a known dog allergy.

Consideration should be given as to the appropriate place for interaction with the dog within the premises. For interactions with a single person, a separate room may be appropriate. For group visits, a communal area may be preferable. Care must be taken to ensure that the environment is cleaned effectively prior to and after the visit.

In relation to all dogs:

- All visits must be agreed in advance
- Dogs should be on a lead and under control at all times
- Dogs should be wearing ID tags, a recognised jacket, or other identification, to show that it is working as either an assistance or therapy dog
- People other than those the dog is visiting must be actively discouraged from talking to the dog without the express permission of the owner / handler. The owner / handler and staff must be able to stop any interaction immediately if they think there are any risks to anyone, including the dog
- Consideration should also be given to cultural and religious beliefs and people who are frightened of dogs or who do not wish to interact with a dog. These situations must be ascertained before a dog is permitted to visit an area and any unplanned interactions prevented

Therapy dogs:

- It is important that the dog must never be left alone with anyone other than their owner / handler. In addition, the owner / handler and dog must always be supported by a member of staff and not be left on their own
- The owner / handler must remove a dog from any situation where they consider the dog to be at risk and be able to read the dog's body language, to ensure that the dog remains comfortable at all times during a visit
- Dog visits should be prearranged so that the appropriate arrangements and risk assessments can be made, thus ensuring the wellbeing of all concerned, including the dog
- Time spent in the setting and the number of people the dog interacts with should be limited, in line with the service providers' operational guidelines. It is recommended that each active session with the dog is no longer than one hour and that dogs should work for no more than three active hours a day. Dogs that are new to the role should visit for shorter periods. It is also important to understand that the intensity of a visit will affect the length of time the dog should be expected to be in the setting and to engage. It is the responsibility of the owner / handler to recognise and respond to their dog's needs and be an effective advocate for them
- If there is any doubt about the health of either the dog or their owner / handler, they should not visit

- The owner / handler should have had a criminal records check (DBS) at a suitable level for the visits they are undertaking

## Summary

Any prudent and responsible organisation will regularly review their policies and practices to make sure that they are doing everything they can to ensure the health and safety of those affected by their undertaking.

Therapy dogs and service dogs fulfil a valuable role in promoting social interaction and reducing psychological responses to anxiety.

Their use has been successfully introduced in different settings including residential care homes, schools and hospitals. Provided a robust risk assessment is completed and effective control measures implemented the benefits from puppy therapy can be easily realised.

## References

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## Further information

For access to further RMP Resources you may find helpful in reducing your organisation's cost of risk, please access the RMP Resources or RMP Articles pages on our website. To join the debate follow us on our LinkedIn page.

## Get in touch

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