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## What makes a great Canine Friends Pet Therapy dog?

by Sandy McAllen



A beautiful Golden Retriever and Canine Friend.

As Liaison Officer for Canine Friends Pet Therapy in Whanganui, I am often asked, "How can I train my dog to be a Canine Friend Pet Therapy dog?"

Our organisation does not offer formal training. We select the suitability of prospective dogs through an interview style assessment process where we meet the owner and their dog and look at the dog's personality and behaviour. Our dogs need to have the right temperament and basic manners to visit people in rest homes, hospitals and hospices.

As with other working dogs, the right personality is important. This was discussed in the *Journal of Applied Animal Behaviour Science* 221 (2019) in a study that Dollion et al. undertook on fear/reactivity in working dogs, "In guide dogs (i.e. dogs for blind or visually impaired people), it has been demonstrated that dog disqualification can be predicted based on personality traits, notably: distractibility, activity,

aggression, fear, sensitivity and docility..."

While our dogs are not required for such specialised work, they may encounter unusual behaviours as well as the occasional in-house cat or resident dog. It is important for them to exhibit a calm and confident personality.

Dog breed can also be an influencing factor. To be a Canine Friend Pet Therapy dog, all breeds of dog are considered except for those listed as 'banned' under the NZ Dog Control Act 1996. Horowitz (2012) says: "...but it is a mistake to think that knowing a breed guarantees that it will behave as advertised — only that it has certain tendencies." The most popular breeds amongst our membership are, in order: Golden Retrievers, Labradors, Shih Tzu X, Greyhounds and Cavoodles.

The interview between the Liaison Officer and the prospective volunteer and their dog provides an opportunity to assess not only the breed but aspects of the dog's behaviour and the importance of early socialisation.

Helen Lamb, a volunteer for Canine Friends Pet Therapy, Auckland, says, "It is quite difficult to answer the 'nature vs nurture' question about dogs. We adopted our little boy Beau when he was three, and did not know anything about his past, except that he needed a new home. As soon as we took him home he cuddled up with us, and has continued to do so — with us and others — for the last six years or so. I think that he probably had a good companion dog temperament right from puppyhood."

Pet owners can train their dogs to be confident and well-mannered in other people's company. According to Mark Vette, Animal Behaviourist and Mentor, while breed disposition and genetics



Helene Lamb's Beau, the loving and cuddly Miniature Poodle, on a visit in Auckland.



Sam Kean's 'firecracker from the pound' and precious Canine Friend, Whittaker.

make a difference "...the important time is between three to 16 weeks. This is, in essence, when they are learning who their family is, and the broader this experience is, the better — for example, different age groups, different races, different species of animal, different experiences, and novel situations. This is when the puppy develops its ever-important coping mechanisms. If you kept the pup isolated with only you, it would grow up very protective and wary of strangers, and be socially inept."

I have met many pet owners who have heart-warming stories of rescue dogs who have gone on to be wonderful canine friends.

Are there certain dogs that just have that 'X' factor? Sam Kean, another volunteer for Canine Friends Pet Therapy, Auckland, says, "Yes. When we met Whittaker for the first time at the pound, he bounced around like a lit firecracker and peed all over my shoes in excitement. I didn't care. I was a vet nurse and used to that happening. But then he calmed down and sat at a heel without being asked, leaning against my leg with his little face beaming up at me. My first thought was, 'Wow you're special, I want you!'"

"He definitely had the 'X' factor. Now five years on he is still the firecracker from the pound, especially when we are getting ready to go to our visits, but once we get there and he has his Canine Friend scarf on, the calm Whittaker appears and he delights everyone he meets."

Personality, breed and good manners all make for a great Canine Friend Pet Therapy dog. If you and your dog would like to join us please visit our website: [www.caninefriends.org.nz](http://www.caninefriends.org.nz). 🐾

## Important notice to all members and clubs



## Breed Features

NZ Dog World would love to run more breed features.

Over the years, the number of members and clubs with the time required to help co-ordinate breed features has declined. — busier lifestyles and so on. We understand that.

With some of the smaller breeds, it has been too hard for them to secure the advertising required to allow a feature to proceed.

With this in mind NZ Dog World would like to re-instate the breed feature requirements as follows.

If you or your club can submit:

- 3-5 articles of interest about your breed (with permission for us to reprint if required)
- and up to 10 high-quality photos

That's it. We will do the rest. If you can secure any advertising to go with your feature, we appreciate it but it is not a requirement for publication.

*So come on all you breed fanciers: if your breed has never had its moment in the sun, this could be the time.*

**Call Derek Johnson on (04) 910-1527 if you have any queries, or receive our fact sheet by emailing [magazine@dogsnz.org.nz](mailto:magazine@dogsnz.org.nz)**

