

Therapy Dogs Today: Their Gifts, Our Obligation. Kris Butler. Oklahoma, Funpuddle Publishing Associates. 2004. 88 pages.

“Therapy Dogs Today: Their Gifts, Our Obligation by Kris Butler, explores complex professional and ethical issues that surround the environments in which therapy dogs do their jobs.” Anyone who trains or handles visiting therapy dogs will find this an insightful reference. Professionals who proactively utilize therapy dogs in their workplace will gain an insider’s viewpoint on how to contribute to the success of a visiting animal program. As a Delta-licensed Instructor, Evaluator, and Pet Partner myself, I commend Kris’ ability to present a balanced perspective to the role of a therapy dog. She includes considering not only the animal but how critical the collaborative roles of the handler and client are to enable and ensure a functional and effective therapy team.

The increased demand for people desiring to have their pet dog become a therapy dog is mirrored by the increasing demand of healthcare and educational facilities to find therapy dog teams to come and interact with their patients and clients with the goal of enhancing lives. What is often lacking on both sides is a commitment to standards of practice which address the necessary preparedness to ensure a successful visiting animal program which is exemplified by skilled, trained and humane utilization of a therapy dog.

“Nothing else dogs do compares to the kinds of intrinsically stressful social interaction that takes place when they visit clinical, educational, or post-trauma situations. Dogs who actually enjoy (these type of) interactions are very rare, and the uniqueness of their talent should be appreciated.” Kris incites serious reflection when she refers to dogs having an inherent talent for the task of visiting. There is much debate over whether or not reluctant dogs can be conditioned to enjoy visiting. Many fine therapy dogs came from a history which put them at a distinct disadvantage to be able to adjust to the various environmental dynamics of visiting. Regardless of the nature vs. nurture debate, Kris maintains clear focus and is very accurate in stating, “ A key issue relating to visiting dogs is that the reasons behind their behavior are not as important as the effects of their behavior”. How our clients perceive the actions of our therapy dogs is the pivotal point to focus on.

Again, to give the reader a clear understanding of the obligation and responsibility inherent in creating an effective visit environment for a therapy dog, Kris poignantly states, “Welcoming dogs and handlers into clinical and educational environments without first assessing the teams’ qualifications and behaviors on-site is an unacceptable risk.” While the handler is ultimately responsible for ethical standards of practice during a visit, the facility staff, which is just as key a player as the handler and the therapy dog, has responsibility to facilitate intervention and, ultimately, for the safe and effective interaction between their clients and a therapy dog.

Careful not to leave any part of the equation incomplete, Kris challenges instructors and trainers to be dissatisfied with arbitrarily issuing what she calls “blank checks of approval” to handlers, but rather to prepare them well by imparting them with an understanding of both the visit environment and how to read and interpret their dog’s response to that environment.

This book achieves a goal of providing self-awareness to the instructor, handler, and facility staff person alike, that effective utilization of a therapy dog does not occur in a vacuum. It involves

the combined effort and understanding of all involved in therapeutic intervention with a dog, that collaboration is a key element of success and most importantly, compassion toward our loyal therapy dogs is a must. I urge anyone who desires to become a more effective instructor, evaluator, therapy dog team, or facility staff person utilizing AAA/T, to partake of Kris' extensive knowledge and experience. The result will be an increased ability to creatively and responsibly work with therapy dogs and as Kris would say, to "discover the endless possibilities inside."

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