



BMDCA Info Series

Bernese Mountain Dogs And Therapy Work

2010 #18

Introduction ► The Bernese Mountain Dog's love of human interactions and their working dog mentality make them well suited for therapy work. Regardless of your relationship with your Berner, sharing your dog in therapy activities will take that relationship and bond to new levels. With proper socialization and training, their loving nature will overcome any concern their size may offer. The striking colors of their coat and the texture and thickness of the fur offer countless possibilities for therapists when working with and treating patients. The positive impact you and your BMD can have on mankind, one individual at a time, is beyond measure and description.

The Diverse World of Animal-assisted Therapy

► Therapy work is loosely divided into two broad categories. Animal-assisted Visitation (AAV) is the oldest and most common form of therapy work. Visits to nursing homes for the purpose of raising the spirits of residents is the single most common form of AAV. Other programs include visitations to both adult and children's wards in acute care hospital wards, mental health facilities, and in some programs to Intensive Care Units, as well as to sessions at cancer, diabetes, and asthma camps. Visits to schools to educate children on therapy work or responsible dog ownership are other increasingly common forms of AAV.

A relatively new form of therapy work is goal-oriented therapy, or Animal-assisted Therapy (AAT). This form of therapy work is directed by a healthcare professional, such as a physical or occupational therapist, who utilizes the therapy animal as a tool to meet the rehabilitation goals of an individual patient. This commonly occurs at an inpatient rehabilitation hospital, where it has been shown to improve and expedite patient outcomes. AAT programs also can occur in the outpatient rehabilitation setting and are especially effective in working with handicapped, developmentally-delayed, or injured children.



An increasingly effective form of AAT is reading programs. Children with identified reading difficulties read to therapy dogs rather than adults or other children. The non-threatening, non-judgmental therapy dogs allow these children to overcome their

reading issues and make tremendous advances in measured reading skills.

What can best be described as hybrid AAT/AAV programs are gaining popularity. These programs involve visitation-type interactions with patients or residents but also utilize behavior modification techniques to obtain visits from therapy animals and to earn privileges for having them present or used during therapy. These programs are quite successful at psychiatric hospitals and prisons, youth homes, and facilities for emotionally- or developmentally-affected individuals, and with veterans diagnosed with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Your local therapy organization will likely offer several different programs to utilize your BMD to help individuals. It will be quite easy to find a program that you and your Berner enjoy doing together.

Temperament and Therapy Work ► Temperament is an animal's innate response to stress. Therapy animals must be able to adapt to stress or unusual occurrences easily but never exhibit any aggressive or fearful behavior. A dog's temperament is influenced by its genetics as well as its interactions with its dam, breeder, and environment during the first eight weeks of life. The most important determination of a dog's life-long temperament is the socialization, training, and relationship provided by its human partner in the first year of life, particularly in the first six months. Therapy animals are best raised in a positive, safe, and healthy environment that provides boundaries as well as rewards for interactions with humans, other dogs, and other species.

Raising a Therapy Berner ► Given the sometimes reserved nature of the Bernese Mountain Dog, early socialization of a Berner puppy is very important. Socialization of a Berner puppy continues on arrival at its new home. Human friends and family should be encouraged to interact with and hold the puppy. Once all the puppy vaccinations are completed, socialization outside the home can begin. All interactions should remain positive and not be intimidating. They can involve as many people, places, and things with which the puppy can interact safely. This socialization should occur frequently throughout the dog's first two years of life and remain a part of its activities as long as it is healthy enough to do so.

Obedience training is a must for any therapy dog. The self



control and teamwork required for safe patient interactions during therapy work can only be obtained through obedience training. Public training classes should be started as soon as puppy shots are completed* and continue for at least the first year of life. (*Note: In some geographic areas and in certain limited environments, the owner and veterinarian together might determine that the pup has adequate immunity to begin outside socialization and public training classes earlier.) Training should be primarily positive and include exercises that teach the dog self-control. Classes also should be geared to growing the bond and trust between you and your Berner. While obedience titles are not required to do therapy work, your BMD should have the fundamental skills required of the AKC Companion Dog title and be able to do them easily and with skill in a variety of settings.

Evaluating Your Berner for Therapy Work ► A number of tests are available to evaluate your Berner's suitability for therapy work. These are known as temperament tests and typically include an obedience component and a component that judges your dog's response to stress. They are administered by someone trained in the appropriate use of the test and its evaluation of the dog's temperament. Following the successful completion of the temperament test, you and your Berner may have to complete a probationary period during which you perform therapy work under the supervision of someone experienced in therapy work. In some settings, particularly AAT programs, additional training in special skills also may be required.

Therapy Dog Organizations ► Most cities and towns have one or more organizations that are involved in AAT or AAV activities. Information about your local program can be obtained from facilities that have therapy programs, local dog clubs, veterinary clinics, and the internet. This is the preferred way to get involved in therapy work, as these programs will typically provide testing, training, support, and a list of volunteer opportunities. Many local therapy organizations become second families to their volunteers.

Several national organizations are involved in therapy work. These groups typically have a focus on animal certification, and many local groups utilize the testing protocols and certification provided by these groups. In many cases the national organization's involvement is limited to testing, and little follow-up training and education are offered. Websites listed at the end of this *Info Sheet* are good tools through which to find a local therapy group and learn more.

Liability Issues ► Most local and national therapy dog groups offer liability insurance that covers you and your dog during therapy work. This insurance is fairly inexpensive and is typically part of a membership fee charged by a group. One should be wary of a group that has been in existence for more than a year or two and does not provide liability insurance, as this is not the norm. In most states if you work outside of a therapy group your Berner would be covered under your Homeowners insurance, but it is worth checking with your insurance agent to confirm your coverage.

Working Your Berner in Therapy ► All reputable therapy groups will have policies and procedures for grooming,

bathing, vaccinating, and the health evaluation of your dog. These are designed to make the patient-therapy team interactions safe and should be stringently followed.

Guiding you in choosing which therapy activity is right for you and your Berner is beyond the scope of this *Info Sheet*, but a few concepts will be presented to help you get started. Visitation programs are fairly fast-moving and involve a significant amount of activity, often on slick floors. Young, outgoing, orthopedically sound dogs work best in this environment. Inpatient rehabilitation programs are generally less active or the activity is of short duration, and less active or more reserved dogs work well in this arena.

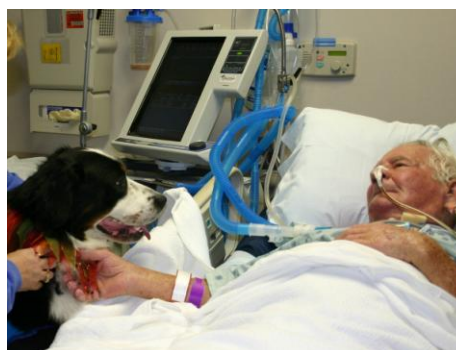
Working with children places special requirements on therapy dogs. If your dog has had little exposure to children or is less interested in children, then working with adults will be preferable. Socializing your dog to children of all ages is required if you want it to do therapy work with children. Regardless of the setting, children are very active and unpredictable, and a therapy dog must be completely tolerant of this behavior.

Children's rehabilitation is an especially rewarding program in AAT but is a unique environment in which to work with your Berner. These facilities are always very noisy and buzzing with activity. Some of what is done in working with the children can be painful, and there is often a lot of crying. The empathetic nature of the BMD can make this a very stressful place for some dogs, and humans, to work.

Closing Thoughts ► Therapy work takes advantage of the human-animal bond to facilitate healing, provide socialization in difficult settings, and provide comfort through touch. These interactions must be provided in a safe and therapeutic setting, and this requires a great deal of work in raising, training, and working with a therapy animal. It is quite fortunate that a variety of characteristics specific to the Bernese Mountain Dog make many well suited for a career in therapy work. And, it is very rewarding to share your Berner with others for their benefit. What is often overlooked is how therapy work changes the human-animal bond between you and your Berner. You will come to know, respect, and love your therapy Berner in an entirely different way.

Websites of Interest ► www.deltasociety.org
www.tdi-dog.org www.therapydogs.com www.therapet.org
www.therapyanimals.org

For a look at one person's experiences with Berners and therapy work please see the *The Caring Canine: Berners and Animal Assisted Therapy – A 15-Year Odyssey*, **The Alpenhorn**, February, 2009 - Activities Issue.



All photos were provided by and printed with permission from the Therapet Foundation.