

How to Pick a Puppy Service Dog Prospect

by Tracey Martin

I know some people say that puppies may work differently from one week to the next, but I've found that the first test done around seven weeks and when the puppies are well rested is probably the most accurate. You may get more of a fear reaction during the eighth week because the pups are going through a fear stage, but I would still expect the puppy to recover quickly. The older the puppy gets, the more environmental influences factor in (though environment will always influence the test to some extent). The breeder notes are also very important to use in conjunction with the test.

This is for the most part how I choose a puppy. I give the things to look for and the things to avoid. There are other reactions possible, but I would only pick a puppy as a service dog prospect if it gave the preferred responses.

All tests items except (3) can be done someplace the puppy hasn't been before. Item (3) is done when you are looking at all the puppies.

The MOST important things to look for in a puppy are:

(1) *Retrieving*

You want the puppy to retrieve a wadded up piece of paper tossed about two or three feet away and bring it back to you. This is the single most important indicator of willingness to please you and work with you. A dog that will retrieve for you as a puppy will be willing to be trained. Sit on the floor. Put the puppy in your lap, facing away from you. Toss a wadded up piece of paper in front of you about two or three feet away. Make sure the puppy sees the paper being tossed. Do this a few times as the puppy may not have noticed the paper toss the first time or needs to think about it. You want the puppy to leave your lap, get the paper, and bring it back to your lap. A puppy that leaves your lap, grabs the paper and drops it on the way back to you is an acceptable response also. This is one of the best indicators that a dog can do any kind of work.

(2) *Quick recovery from startling experiences*

Drop a metal pan on a hard floor near the pup. The puppy can startle but should recover quickly and perhaps show some curiosity. Pop open an umbrella and set it down. Again, the puppy can startle but should recover quickly and perhaps even investigate the umbrella. Attacking either item isn't a good response. If the puppy doesn't recover

quickly it will never have the steady nerves to be a service dog or a good all round pet dog. I would not bring a dog that fails this test into a home with children either. Ignoring the pan/umbrella may indicate sight or hearing issues.

(3) Order in which the puppies greet you

Never take the puppy that runs up to you first and then runs away. Take the puppy that comes up to you a little later, crawls into your lap and doesn't leave. The first puppy will be a handful and have his own ideas about things. The second puppy will bond easily with you and be more likely to follow your moods and stay by your side. If a puppy doesn't interact with you at all or does a quick "drive by" or nips your hands, then you definitely don't want that one.

(4) Acceptance of being held

I prefer a puppy to feel limp when I pick them up. The puppy might wiggle a little at first, but the puppy you want settles quickly and cuddles. Avoid the puppy that squeals in fear or nips/bites your hand at being restrained or "held". I don't like a puppy that doesn't seem to enjoy being held. This is something that can be changed a bit by the breeder. A puppy that isn't held much by the breeder may not like to be held.

(5) Following

Individually take each of the puppies that are doing well and go to a spot they haven't been before. Speak softly to the puppy and begin walking away. You want the puppy that quietly follows you because he will follow your lead in life. Don't take the puppy that follows but bites your ankles or the puppy that hides or runs away.

(6) Forgiveness

Pinch gently between the puppy's toes. If the puppy gives you a dirty look and then goes away, this pup is a poor prospect for service dog work. It will tend to get offended easily and then not work for you. You want the puppy that snuggles up to you or perhaps licks you in response to the toe pinch. This pup will forgive you when you get manic or angry and will help you when you need it.

Inheritance considerations

It was found that if you breed dogs that do well on these tests as puppies, they will produce puppies that do well on these tests. What does this mean to you? If the parent dogs are biddable, like to play fetch, are obedient and free from aggression and fear of loud noises and visual stimulus, then chances are the puppies will be too. It also means that if there is something you don't like or is "strange" about the parent dogs, chances are it will show up in the puppies later on.

You want a puppy that has been left with its littermates till they are eight to nine weeks old at least. Puppies removed prior to this may have issues as adults with other dogs and with aggression toward humans. I will usually wait till the ninth week to bypass the eighth week fear period. Don't have an eight-week-old puppy shipped. It may cause fear issues later. It is okay for a puppy to spend more time with the breeder, but only if the puppy is given some training, plenty of individualized attention, and socialization.

Everyone mentions health checks. You should check with the breed's parent club and find out what sorts of health checks to look for because this is different for each breed. Also keep in mind that while health checks in the parent animals and immediate ancestors decrease the chances of your puppy having one of these issues, it is not an absolute guarantee that your dog will never have an issue.

Also, a mention on show breeders. Some are good and some only care about the dog's looks. Many show breeders are only concerned about how their dogs do in the conformation ring. This has led them to ignore hereditary behavior flaws and breed dogs that are not good candidates for being a service dog. You are better off finding a breeder that produces dogs doing well in obedience or some other activity. Best of all is the breeder that produces service dogs.

Breeder socialization of puppies

The most important socializing your puppy will ever have happens at the breeder's. Before the pups are 12 weeks of age, they absolutely must:

- already have gone for many car rides
- be used to household noises
- have been exposed to different types of flooring
- have been handled by different people of all ages and preferably different races and sexes
- have had things to climb over, walk on, and play with

Kids are one of the greatest socializers of puppies, that is if the children play with the puppies. Some of the best show breeders (and hobby breeders) are guilty of not giving much attention to their puppies, so watch out! They will keep the dog in the kennel for 6 months and then have a look at it for showing—or sell the dog to you. A dog raised in a kennel is almost NEVER a good prospect. A service dog puppy should be raised in the home.

Read the contract before buying

Some breeders may want to keep partial ownership of a show-quality puppy. If this is the case, find out if the breeder is going to take your SD from you and show them for months on end. You may be without a service dog during this time! Or, you may be allowed to show the puppy yourself, but realize that this is a big commitment as far as time and money goes. It is good to talk to a few other people that have co-owned a dog with them.

Also keep in mind that many show breeders prefer that a show quality dog not be trained to sit or down because they feel it will confuse the dog in the show ring. Any intelligent dog should be able to tell the difference and a service dog needs to know how to sit and down. Find out if the breeder's agenda will conflict with your dog's main job, being a service dog.

Most responsible breeders will take the puppy back if it doesn't work out. Many will refund you the purchase price if you haven't had the puppy for very long. Usually you will not get the full purchase price back if you keep the puppy for several months. Talk to the breeder about returning the puppy if you need to, and get it in writing!