

Manners Unleashed: Etiquette Regarding Service Dogs

By Laura Magnuson

Service dogs help people who are blind or have other disabilities in a variety of ways. In addition to improving their handlers' mobility, functioning, and safety, these carefully trained working animals also are ambassadors of social inclusion. Because of their specific training and role in the life of their handler, however, it is important to observe some simple rules of etiquette when interacting with a team. By doing so, you respect the team's working relationship and help ensure the safety of both handler and dog.

Understand the Training

Service dogs aren't like pet dogs. From the moment they are born, they are being shaped for the important work they will do. Carefully bred for temperament and health, most service dogs are trained at nonprofit training centers or schools. After eight weeks of care by staff at the school, the puppies are given to selected individuals or families known as puppy raisers or puppy walkers for at least a year. Once the year in the foster home is completed, the dog is sent back to the school for up to six months of formal training. After this training is completed and the dog has passed all behavioral and physical requirements, the dog is then matched with a handler who has a disability.

The last month of training is usually reserved for the team to work and train together. The handler is taught how to give commands to the dog, and the two begin to form a bond. After the training is completed, the team graduates and the dog goes home with the handler.

Recognize a Working Team

When a service dog is working, you should not engage with it in any way. You may not always be aware when an animal is working, however. Some people, for example, mistakenly think that a service dog at rest beside its handler is not working, and they approach to pet it.

Here's a good rule to follow: If you see a service dog wearing a harness or cape, ask if petting or talking with the animal is permitted—even if it seems to be at rest. The handler may tell you that the dog is on duty or in harness. This means that although the dog is not active, it is still working and should not be petted.

Avoid Creating Distractions

In addition to petting a working service dog, other interactions can place both the dog and handler at risk. These exchanges include talking to the dog, making eye contact, or doing anything else that might create a distraction for the animal. For example, calling the dog's name or giving it commands such as "come" or "sit" are inappropriate. Many handlers, in fact, do not give out their dog's name to avoid the possibility of the dog being distracted when hearing its name.

Keep in mind that your physical presence might be a distraction at times, too. When walking alongside a working team, it is best to walk on the side of the handler opposite from where the dog is. Doing so gives the dog room to work and avoids the possibility of the dog needing to work around you.

The best way to avoid creating distractions is to ask the handler if it's okay to interact with the animal. Most handlers will see your question as a great opportunity to further educate you about his or her dog.

Don't Give Food to Service Dogs

You may enjoy slipping your own dog a treat now and then, but doing so with service dogs can lead to negative consequences for both dog and handler.

Service dogs are usually kept to a strict schedule of food and water and are not allowed food meant for human consumption. "People food" can upset the dog's digestion and promote bad habits such as begging.

The most critical reason for not giving food to a service dog, however, has to do with where the dog accompanies its handler. Service dogs are granted access to anywhere the general public is allowed, including restaurants. If the dog is exposed to food meant for humans and acquires a taste for it, the dog may develop unacceptable behavior in a restaurant.

If you want to offer a service dog food, always ask first. Be aware, however, that a handler is likely to say no. He or she is more likely to agree to the dog being offered water instead of food, especially if the weather is hot.

Understand Workplace Etiquette

Most of the suggestions that apply to the general public regarding service dogs also apply in a work setting. As a coworker, you may socialize more with the handler than you otherwise might, due to the dog's presence. Though this interaction is good for both the handler and you, remember to always ask before approaching the service dog, even if the dog attempts to gain your attention.

Having a dog in a work environment may present some conflict between the working team and other employees. Some people may be afraid of dogs, for example, and others may suffer from allergies. These problems usually can be managed by keeping the handler and dog separate from the person who is afraid of or allergic to dogs.

Like coworkers and employers, handlers have a role to play in workplace etiquette as well. The handler is responsible for keeping the dog quiet and under control at work.

And Remember

When observing a team in action, you may see the handler correct the dog's behavior in ways you may find objectionable. Called "leash corrections," these methods most commonly include a sharp pull of the leash. Handlers use this tool to regain the dog's attention if it is distracted or as a negative consequence for bad behavior.

Pulling on a dog's collar may seem cruel, but done appropriately it does not hurt the dog. Handlers are trained by the school staff in the appropriate ways of giving a leash correction. These methods of training are necessary for both the dog and the handler and are meant to keep both out of danger.

Conclusion

Service dogs are an invaluable tool for their handlers. They provide mobility, inclusion, comfort, and companionship, and they foster social interaction through their very presence. By understanding the proper etiquette for interacting with a working team, you can help keep things safe and positive.

Resources

Americans with Disabilities Act
ada.gov

Guide Dogs for the Blind
guidedogs.com

International Association of Assistance Dog Partners
iaadp.org