

# The Rule for Service Dogs: Don't Touch or Distract Them

You might want to go gaga over them, but you shouldn't. It could put someone in harm's way and interfere with the dog's focus on his or her most important task. If you can't help yourself (and many of us can't), please at least follow these 8 important dos and don'ts.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Many people don't realize there are rules of etiquette when in the presence of a service dog team (the dog and the owner/handler)
- Service dogs should never be approached, talked to or touched unless permission is asked for and granted by the dog's handler. No offense should be taken if the handler asks you not to interact with the dog
- Distracting a working dog can result in potential harm to the handler, and can interfere with the dog's focus and ability to follow potentially life-saving commands or cues

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If you're crazy about dogs, you've probably found it difficult to "mind your manners" in the presence of service animals. I know I have. These dogs are so beautiful and carry themselves with such quiet dignity that they're nearly irresistible. But resist we must.

Whether the dog is in service or in training to serve, the rule of thumb is: don't touch or distract him. This is because interacting with a dog that is working or training could put the other half of his team — his owner — in harm's way.

It could also interfere with the dog's focus and inhibit his ability to pick up commands.

Puppies destined to be service dogs begin training on the day they're born, and it takes a minimum of two years before they're ready to work full-time. Training is customized for each dog. Essentially, the dogs choose their jobs based on their specific skill sets.

In case you're not sure of proper etiquette when you encounter a working dog, the following are some do's and don'ts for behavior around a service dog team (dog and owner).

## 8 Dos and Don'ts for Behavior Around a Service Dog Team

1. **DO speak to the owner/handler rather than the dog** — The service dog and her handler are a team. If you want to talk to them, always speak to the person first rather than automatically approaching the dog. Remember, the animal is working, and her human's life could depend on her staying focused on her job.

2. **DON'T touch the dog without asking permission first** — Touching or petting a working dog is a distraction and may prevent him from tending to his human partner. The dog may be in the process of completing a command or direction given by his human, and you don't want to interfere.

Fortunately, most service dogs are trained to stay in work mode until they receive a release command from their handler. That's why many service dogs are able to ignore outside influences.

3. **DO keep your own dog a distance away from a working dog** — If you happen to have your dog with you when you encounter a service dog team, don't allow your pet to approach them without first talking with the handler to see if it's permissible.

Other animals are an obvious distraction to working dogs, and in a worst-case scenario, there could be an altercation between the two animals.

4. **DON'T offer food to a service dog** — According to Canine Companions for Independence, "Food is the ultimate distraction to the working dog and can jeopardize the working assistance dog team."<sup>1</sup>

Not only are food and treats a potential distraction, but many service dogs are fed a specific diet and often on a specific schedule.

5. **DO treat the owner/handler with sensitivity and respect** — Asking a service dog's handler personal questions about his or her disability is out of bounds. It's disrespectful and an intrusion of privacy.

Assume the service dog team can handle things themselves. If you sense they could use your help, ask first. And don't take it personally if your offer is rejected, as there's usually a good reason.

6. **DON'T assume a napping service dog is off duty** — All dogs nap, including working dogs. When her handler is sitting or standing for some length of time, it's perfectly natural and appropriate for a service dog to catch a few winks. She's still technically at work, however, so all dos and don'ts remain in effect.

7. **DO inform the handler if a service dog approaches you** — If a working dog approaches you, sniffs or nudges you, etc., politely let the handler know. Resist the urge to respond to the dog — the handler will correct the dog.

8. **DON'T assume service dogs never get to 'just be dogs'** — Working dogs typically get plenty of R&R and playtime. When they're home and out of their "work clothes," they're free to behave like any other dog. Since the jobs these wonderful animals do are often challenging and stressful, their handlers recognize they need plenty of downtime and exercise.

## Types of Service Dogs

- **Guide dogs for the blind** — Also called seeing eye dogs, guide dogs are trained to lead their owners safely around obstacles. They also learn "intelligent disobedience," which means they know to disobey unsafe commands (for example: guiding their owner into the middle of a busy street).

Guide dogs must have beautiful manners for those times when they take public transportation or visit stores or restaurants. They must also be skilled at staying focused and avoid reacting to distractions. Most importantly, guide dogs must demonstrate a temperament that makes them eager to please and willing to work.

- **Hearing dogs for the deaf** — At home, hearing dogs are trained to alert their owners to household noises that are necessary for day-to-day independence and safety. They make physical contact with their human and lead him or her to the source of the sound.

Hearing dogs provide their deaf owners with a degree of freedom and independence they wouldn't otherwise have.

Out in public, hearing dogs provide their owners with an increased awareness of their environment. The deaf learn to pay attention to the reactions of their dog and take their cues from him.

If the dog stops suddenly or turns to look at something, his owner is prompted to do the same.

- **Mobility assistance dogs** — Mobility assistance dogs perform a variety of different tasks for their humans, for example, pressing the button to open automatic doors, picking up dropped items, and bringing out-of-reach objects within reach.

Dogs placed with owners who use wheelchairs can be taught to help pull the chair up a ramp if necessary.

Mobility assistance dogs can also function as a brace for people who have balance or strength problems, and in properly equipped homes, they can open and close doors, turn lights on and off, and go to another person in the residence for help.

There are also other types of dogs that help people cope in life, including therapy dogs, diabetes and seizure alert dogs, mental health assistance dogs, and dogs trained to work with military veterans with emotional or physical disabilities.

## Sources and References

[AZCentral April 8, 2015](#)

[PetMD](#)

[Service Dog Central](#)

<sup>1</sup> [Canine Companions for Independence](#)

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