

COMFORT PET PROGRAM TRAINING COURSE

Welcome to the ComForT Pet Program's animal and handler's skills course!

During the next several weeks, volunteers will work with you and your pet to enhance the skills necessary for you both to interact safely and reliably with the elderly and the impaired. We will introduce the equipment often present in facilities accommodating these populations.

We ask that you practice all the skills you learn throughout the class in several different environments. Start slowly, but after your animal seems to respond correctly on a routine basis, add new distractions and environments. You must make a commitment to spend time with your pet in many different places and around new people and things.

Please be on time to class. Feed your dog early or after class and see that they have had a chance to relieve themselves. Always bring your animal to class well groomed from head to toe exactly as he/she will be seen on a visit. You should wear casual, comfortable clothing, as you will be moving a lot.

Keep your dog on a short lead close to you and away from other dogs as much as possible. If there is tension between animals remove your dog immediately.

ComForT (Companions for Therapy) is a twenty-three-old national award-winning animal visitation program sponsored by the Area Agency on Aging for North Florida, Inc. Our mission is "To bring animal teams to visit those who can no longer own or are temporarily separated from their pets, bringing motivational, recreational, and therapeutic benefits to those in need."

ComForT requires that Delta Society register all volunteer teams as Pet Partners. The handler and animal must pass the Delta Society's skills and aptitude tests that are administered upon completion of this training session. Delta Society evaluators will determine whether students pass or fail.

Upon completion of all requirements and entry into the ComForT Pet Program, you will be free to pursue group visits. The ComForT Pet Program's Volunteer Services Coordinator is available to answer questions or concern. The Coordinator (Stephanie Pekrins) can be reached at (850) 488-0055. **Please note that all persons currently enrolled in a class must attend at least one visit without their pet before they can be evaluated. This should be arranged through the Program Coordinator.**

Learning is stressful for your dog. To keep stress at a minimum, ComForT recommends frequent brief training sessions that incorporate lots of play and praise. There are many

ways to teach each exercise but we will only use a few. If you prefer other methods, please use them. If you choose to use food treats as a reward, please keep them away from other dogs.

Thank you for choosing the ComForT Pet Program as a way of improving our community and enhancing lives through volunteering. We are certain that both you and your pet will experience many rewarding and heartwarming moments!

EXERCISES

ATTENTION

There is one exercise that must precede all others...the ATTENTION EXERCISE. Without your dog's attention, he/she will learn nothing. The fastest way to teach attention is with treats. With your dog standing or sitting in front of you, call his/her name and bring the treat to his/her nose. As soon as they look at you, praise them and give them the treat. Be sure to smile and use a happy, upbeat tone of voice. Try this several times always praising and giving the treat. Gradually bring your hand with the treat closer to your face and farther away from your dog so that the dog looks at your face when you call his name.

After your dog starts responding reliably to his name by looking at your face, you should begin phasing out the treat and give it to your dog every other time gradually decreasing the frequency to giving the treat only at the end of the exercise. Continue the praise. Practice this 5 or 6 times every day. If your dog starts jumping toward you, keep your foot on the leash.

Next, you should begin to add distractions to this exercise. You could practice in a different location or in the company of other people and/or animals. IF your dog doesn't look at you when you call its name, you may try gently tapping on his head with your hand. Sometimes, you may need to give a correction in the form of a gentle tug on the leash up towards your face. After three tugs, if your dog hasn't responded, gently reach down and lift the dog's head up. Praise immediately. Gradually extend the time he is to look at you. Any time you lose the dog's attention, do something. Either lift his head, encourage him, or correct him. This exercise needs to be practiced every day, as it is the basis for all other exercises. It is very important that you are able to get your dog's attention at any moment. PLEASE PRACTICE!!!

RELEASE YOUR DOG

Every exercise must have a beginning, middle, and an end. In the beginning, treats help motivate your dog into the exact position you want. As your dog's understanding of the exercise increases, gradually extend the amount of time your dog maintains this position.

Your release word should always be enthusiastic. “Free dog!” or “Yes!” are good release words followed by treats and/or praise.

YOUR ATTITUDE MATTERS!

You need to know what motivates your dog in order to form a relationship with your dog in which you are the well respected leader of the team at all times. Keep training playful, upbeat and fun. Never punish your dog. Correct a wrong response by showing your dog the appropriate response. Each dog will progress at a different rate. Dogs learn by repetition. Keep your goals in mind when planning your training sessions each day. If things aren't going well one day, stop your training for the day or play a game with your dog. Take a walk with your dog and just relax. The next day will go better.

WALKING ON A LOOSE LEAD

Begin walking with your dog on a 6-foot leash. As your dog approaches the end of the leash, quickly turn and walk rapidly in the opposite direction. When your dog feels the leash snap, he/she will turn to follow you. As your dog rushes forward again to take the lead, turn and walk rapidly in the opposite direction. Praise your dog when he/she is by your side and paying attention to you. Practice this exercise until your dog realizes that he/she is receiving a correction by forging ahead of you to the end of the leash. Gradually take your dog outside to practice this exercise. Eventually, your dog will be happy to walk beside you and will not be anxious to feel the snap of the leash when they get too far ahead.

GROOMING AND THE OVERALL EXAM

Some dogs don't like to be brushed, held, or touched on certain areas of their bodies. Since a part of their job in pet therapy is to allow others to pet them, this is an important skill to teach them. The younger the dog, the quicker he/she will learn. However, dogs of any age can be taught to accept handling if it's pleasurable.

Put the dog on a lead, talk to him/her warmly and begin scratching them in a place they enjoy (behind the ears, the belly, etc.). Continue chatting cheerfully while running your hand to the area he/she doesn't like to be touched. Brush gently over it and go back to scratching the pleasant spot. Do this over and over. When they relax, pause over the troubled area. Give them a treat, gently tickle the area and go back to scratching the pleasant spot. Do this for several days. If they fuss, tell them “Stop it” in a firm voice and give them a quick correction with the lead. Immediately go back to praising and practicing.

Dogs that don't like to be brushed can be handled the same way. Start at a point where your dog feels comfortable and brush over him/her once. Pet him/her some more. Continue this until they pay no attention to the brush. If the dog is sensitive, use a soft brush. Brush a small section at a time then take a break, praise them, give them a treat,

play a bit, then brush a bit more. It's not important that you groom the whole dog right now...your goal is for him/her to enjoy brushing.

Struggling dogs can be difficult to hold. People often put a struggling pet down on the ground, so the dog has learned that struggling earns freedom. You should firmly tell him "Stop it", and perhaps give a quick correction with the lead. When he/she lies quietly for a few seconds, release them using your release word. He/she must learn quickly that calm behavior gets them a quick release. Then go back and do more later.

Pick up all four paws often and from an early age. Using the same technique, examine ears and teeth and hold the tail. Make clumsy movements over the dog's body and around his head. Small sessions with praise and treats will make the overall exam fun!

REVIEW OF SIT AND DOWN

While holding your dog's collar in your left hand, place your right hand with a treat over your dog's head. Say "Sit" while moving the food upward over the dog's head. The dog's rump will naturally go down as his head goes up to follow the food. As soon as the dog sits, give him/her the reward. Repeat several times a day. As soon as your dog consistently sits on command, you can begin adding small distractions.

With your dog in a sitting position, hold the food in your right hand. Command your dog to "Down" while moving your hand down toward the floor therefore guiding your dog down. Praise your dog immediately and give him/her the treat when he goes to the floor.

REVIEW OF SIT-STAY AND DOWN-STAY

With your dog in a sitting position beside you, give the command "Stay". Step out with your right foot and pivot directly in front of and facing the dog. If your dog attempts to get up when you praise him/her, reposition him/her into a sit but say nothing. Gradually add distractions. When your dog is steady with distractions go out a little further the next time you leave him until you can go the full extension of the leash. Any time your dog moves, you must go back to in front of him/her and when you leave him/her again do not go as far. Repeat with the down position. Always use your release word to release your stay. Many people go back to heel position before releasing the dog.

REVIEW OF COME WHEN CALLED

Walk briskly with your dog on a loose lead. Give the command "Fido, Come" and back up five or six steps as quickly as you can. Reward him/her with food and praise when they reach you. If he/she goes past you, say nothing until he/she comes back to you. When he/she comes when called reliably, place him/her in a sit-stay. Leave him/her, stepping out with your right foot and go to the end of your leash. Call "Fido, Come" and gently tug on the leash until he/she comes toward you. Praise and reward your dog when they reach you. You may ask them to sit when they get to you but in our class this will not be necessary.

GOOD CANINE MANNERS IN A HEALTHCARE ENVIRONMENT

Many of the Delta Society testing procedures will evaluate your dog and how it is likely to respond to unusual situations involving strange equipment and unfamiliar people. We will see a majority of these new sights and sounds during our visits with frail populations. It is very important to introduce your dog to as many new sights, sounds, locations and people as you can in order for your dog to become very comfortable with each of these. We will spend some time in class acting out different scenarios that you might encounter on a visit. We are assessing you as well as your dog. It is your job to control the actions of your animal, to be proactive (anticipate ahead of time, help your animal avoid or correctly respond) in each situation the team may encounter. As you practice your commands with your animal, we will introduce new equipment (wheelchairs, walkers and crutches), people with infirmities, crowds and sudden noises. While you help you animal successfully through the situations you encounter, you must role-play as though you are on a visit in each of the scenarios. We cannot emphasize enough how important it is to successfully handle your animal while remaining in control of each situation. You must practice as often as possible in new environments with new people.

SKILLS REQUIRED FOR THE PET PARTNERS' SKILLS TEST (PPST)

1. Accepting a Friendly Stranger

The evaluator walks up and greets the animal in a friendly manner.

2. Accepting Petting

The evaluator approaches the animal and pets the animal on the head and body.

3. Appearance and Grooming

The evaluator assesses the handler's appearance. The handler should be dressed in clean, appropriate clothing for a visit. The evaluator then inspects the animal by feeling the coat and looking at the eyes, toenails, and ears.

4. Out for a Walk

The evaluator directs the team to the start of a path to be walked. The evaluator will ask the team to stop twice on the walk. The dog should walk quietly beside the handler. Leash should be loose, except to direct the dog.

5. Walking through a Crowd

The evaluator will direct the team to walk a straight path through 3 approaching assistants.

6. Reaction to Distractions

As the team begins walking back from the crowd, the evaluator and/or assistants perform a selected auditory and visual distraction. Example: a person in a wheelchair passes in front of the team then a door slams suddenly.

7. Sit on Command

8. Down on Command

9. Stay on Command

Dog stays on command while handler walks to the end of a 10-foot line, turns to face the dog, pauses 2-3 seconds, then returns to dog.

10. Come when Called

The evaluator pleasantly distracts the dog by scratching the dog and talking to it. The handler walks to the end of a 10-foot line and calls the dog.

11. Reaction to a Neutral Dog

Neutral team and team being evaluated approach each other. Both teams stop, shake hands, and exchange pleasantries for no more than 10 seconds then continue walking past each other.

SKILLS REQUIRED FOR THE PET PARTNERS' APTITUDE TEST (PPAT)

A. Overall Exam

The evaluator looks in the animal's ears, holds its tail, checks its teeth and handles all of its feet.

B. Exuberant and Clumsy Petting

Using elbows and clenched hand, the evaluator pets the animal while making unusual sounds (simulating speech difficulty).

C. Restraining Hug

The evaluator leans over and gives the animal a full body hug around the shoulders and restricts the animal's movement.

D. Staggering and Gesturing Individual

The assistant approaches the team using healthcare equipment while staggering, weaving, waving arms and moaning as if in pain. Assistant stops 6 feet from the team and ceases the staggering and vocalizations. If the animal approaches, the assistant pets the animal.

E. Angry Yelling

While the team is interacting with the staggering individual, another duo comes beside the team and begins yelling at each other angrily and waving their arms. Once the evaluator cues the duo to stop, they return to neutral postures.

F. Bumped from Behind

While the petting of the staggering individual and the angry yelling distracts the team, the evaluator will come up from behind and bump into the animal's body with his/her leg with no warning.

G. Crowded Petting/ Petting by Several People

The 3 assistants (one with healthcare equipment) will approach the team one at a time and begin to touch the animal until all 3 are gathered closely around the animal. They all talk and try to get the animal's attention.

H. Leave It

The evaluator places an appropriate toy about 10 feet from the team. The evaluator directs the team to walk forward by the toy, such that the toy is on the same side as the animal. The animal may ignore or show casual interest in the toy. Some sniffing is acceptable, but it should not mouth or pick up the toy. While walking beside the toy for this exercise, the handler could use the Attention Command in order to distract the dog from the toy.

I. Offered a Treat

The evaluator offers a treat to the animal. The treat may be refused, but if the animal takes it, it must do it gently.

J. Overall Assessment

The evaluator will make an overall evaluation of the handler's skills in handling and managing the animal.

NOTE: SEVERAL OF THESE EXERCISES ARE DIFFERENT FOR SMALL DOGS (UNDER 15 LBS). YOUR INSTRUCTORS WILL EXPLAIN THE DIFFERENCES.