Chapter 1

The Quiet Experts

Imagine you are the mother of a 5-year-old boy with Down syndrome, a genetic abnormality that causes mild to moderate delays in physical and intellectual development. Although capable of functioning successfully in many ways, your son, Robbie, has difficulty maintaining his balance while walking. You want him to be as independent as possible, but he doesn't have the physical skills to navigate on his own. Even after receiving physical therapy, Robbie still needs help.

You've read about guide dogs who help blind people and about assistance dogs who open doors and pick up dropped objects for their owners. You decide to try to find a pet dog who might be able to somehow help your son.

In the Sunday newspaper, you notice a classified ad placed by a breeder for a litter of Standard Poodles. You remember that Poodles shed very little and don't produce much dander, thereby making them an excellent choice for owners who suffer from allergies or asthma, or who just hate to vacuum the house all the time. You know that Standard Poodles are large dogs, which means they will have the physical size and strength to interact with a child with mobility issues, who may tumble over or suddenly grab onto them for support. You also know that Standard Poodles are lean and graceful for their size, not broad and massive like Rottweilers, which, in your thinking, would make Poodles easier to manage physically. You decide to buy one of these pups for Robbie.

After a few months, your dog has matured into a lovely, pure white, adolescent Standard Poodle named Jane. She and Robbie get along wonderfully, and you've had no trouble housetraining Jane or teaching her a few simple signals, like "stay" and "down." But Jane cannot be as effective a companion for

Robbie as you had hoped because she wants to play much of the time and her preoccupation with games interferes with her ability to help Robbie. When visitors arrive, Jane becomes excited and difficult to manage. Easily distracted in public, Jane cannot stay calm while you are walking in the park or spending the afternoon at the playground. She dances around trying to interact with other dogs and people, wants to chase squirrels and rabbits, and pays little attention to Robbie. When he leans on Jane for balance and support, she sometimes loses focus, speeds up her pace, and Robbie falls down. Now it's harder to manage Jane and Robbie together than it was to manage Robbie alone. Jane is not the helpful, take-anywhere companion you had envisioned for Robbie, although she has brightened his life considerably at home and he loves her dearly.

Thankfully, you do not surrender Jane to the local animal shelter in exasperation, and you refuse to just leave her home all the time and abandon your hopes of finding a helping companion for Robbie. You do a little research and find an assistance dog trainer who provides the missing element necessary for shaping Jane into a polite, focused, take-anywhere companion dog: managed socialization training.

Two keys unlock the full potential of a dog to become a fit and enjoyable companion for his human owner. One key is behavior skills training, in which you teach your dog the particular behaviors that will make him an acceptable companion, such as responding to your signal to wait for you to tell him to go out the door, rather than having him barge through the doorway and knock you over on the way out. Behavior skills training addresses the physical skills you want your dog to have as your companion.

The other key is social skills training, in which you teach your dog the social skills necessary to function as an acceptable inhabitant of the complex, contemporary environment in which he lives, such as remaining calm and quiet in an elevator or a motel room. Social skills training addresses the emotional skills you want your dog to have as your companion.

Assistance dog trainers are unique among the ranks of dog trainers in that they have refined a highly successful and very efficient method of securing the second, and most elusive, key to creating the perfect companion dog—social skills training.

Assistance dog trainers work for assistance dog training centers and foundations across the country. Some provide assistance dog services through their own private training firms. These trainers rarely teach the standard dog obedience classes offered through local dog training clubs, county recreation departments, pet supply shops, and the like. They don't become television personalities or publish quirky training books. They quietly and regularly produce a succession of dogs with the behavioral and social skills required of a true companion animal.

Assistance dog trainers do have a lot in common with dog obedience class instructors: They are skilled in teaching dogs specific behaviors. However, assistance dog trainers add a critical ingredient missing from many standard obedience training curriculums: a systematic, well-defined, carefully managed dog socialization plan.

Let's take a look at how assistance dog trainers raise and train the dogs. We can start by understanding what the dogs must do and where they must do it. Once we understand the trainers' goals, we can tap into their training secrets and discover how they can help you and your dog.

DEFINING THE TERMS

What is socialization? It's the process of desensitizing any living being to a wide variety of environmental conditions and situations through repeated exposure. Some trainers call it "habituation," "desensitizing," "exposure training," "life skills training," "behavior modulation training," or even "environmental inoculation." Socialization includes training a dog to manage himself in diverse environments.

What is managed dog socialization? It is a well-planned approach to the socialization process that efficiently develops positive outcomes and desired results. We might also call it a positive-outcome socialization program.

Proper socialization is a crucial element in the upbringing of assistance and therapy dogs, and it's also vitally important in the upbringing of all dogs, including family dogs whose owners envision their pets as companions they can take almost anywhere, who will live comfortably and politely in the home, and who will conduct themselves with good manners in public.

Assistance Dogs

Founded in 1987, *Assistance Dogs International (ADI)* is a coalition of not-for-profit organizations that train and place assistance dogs. ADI hosts seminars and meetings for assistance dog trainers. Its mission statement also includes the following goals:

- Educating the public about assistance dogs
- Ensuring the legal rights of people with assistance dogs
- Setting the standards and establishing the guidelines and ethics for training assistance dogs
- Improving the bond of the dog-partner team

According to ADI, "assistance dog" is a generic term for guide, hearing, or service dogs specifically trained to do more than one task to mitigate an individual's disability. Dogs used for protection or personal defense are not included in this definition. Classified under the umbrella term "assistance dog" are:

- Guide dog: a dog who guides blind or visually impaired individuals. Guide dog owners rely on their dogs to safely negotiate the unseen environment.
- Hearing dog: a dog who alerts deaf or hard-of-hearing individuals to specific sounds. Hearing dog owners rely on their dogs to indicate the presence of unheard but important sounds in the environment.
- Service dog: a dog who works for individuals with disabilities other than blindness or deafness. Service dog owners rely on their dogs to perform physical tasks or to provide assistance in a medical emergency.
- Psychiatric service dog: a dog who supports individuals who have a condition attributed to a brain chemistry malfunction or to emotional distress. Psychiatric service dog owners rely on their dogs to help them cope with panic disorder, depression, post-traumatic stress syndrome, agoraphobia, and other such conditions.

Each of these types of assistance dogs lives in the home with their disabled owner and is trained with the goal of mitigating their owner's specific disabling conditions.

Most assistance dog trainers refer to the owner as the "partner," indicating the close and mutually respectful relationship that develops between an assistance dog and his owner.

Many people think assistance dogs help only severely impaired partners, such as blind people or people in the last stages of a degenerative disease such as multiple sclerosis. However, many assistance dogs support mildly disabled partners who just want to live independently without becoming a burden on family members, who want to maintain employment, who want to avoid pain, or who may need help in a crisis. Performing simple tasks such as bringing a phone to the partner, opening a cupboard with an attached strap, or tapping a floor pedal to turn on a lamp can sometimes make the difference between a comfortable life and a life of frustrating dependence for a mildly disabled person.

Assistance dog training takes place in several stages:

- Early puppy training: If the assistance dog organization has bred the prospective assistance dog for its program or a breeder plans to donate a puppy to the group, early behavioral and social training begins in the

first weeks of the puppy's life. Dogs who enter an assistance dog training program from a shelter or from a home environment will not have this portion of the training program, but still can work successfully.

- Training with a puppy raiser: When a puppy is ready to leave the litter, assistance dog training centers place the puppy with a *puppy raiser,* an individual or family selected by the center to socialize the puppy, begin to teach him a few basic obedience skills, and prepare the puppy to enter the formal assistance dog training program. Puppy raisers attend classes with the puppy to learn and practice, under supervision, behavioral and socialization techniques. They maintain the puppy in their care for six months to one year.
- Assistance skills training: Staff trainers teach the adolescent dog the specific behaviors needed to mitigate the disabilities experienced by his prospective partner. When the puppy raiser returns the dog to the center at about 1 year old, the staff trainers begin this more formal training, which lasts about four to six months.
- Working assistance dog follow-up training: Usually conducted monthly for the first year following placement with a partner, and annually thereafter, follow-up training ensures that the partner understands and uses the proper methods to teach the dog new behaviors, and continues to provide socialization opportunities for the dog.

Assistance dog trainers manage all stages of training and monitor the progress of each dog, making recommendations about changes to the program to suit each individual dog and partner.

For the family dog owner, the later stages of assistance dog training that teach specific helping behaviors are interesting but not vital. But the socialization and basic obedience training, the training that produces the foundation on which all the rest of the dog's training and ultimate success rests, is of critical importance to any companion dog.

Public Access

Assistance dog partners and trainers enjoy the benefit of public access guaranteed to them by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, a federal civil-rights law. This legislation gives a person with a disability the right to be accompanied by their assistance dog in all places that are open to the public. It also gives assistance dog trainers the right to work with a dog in public places so they can replicate real-life situations in the training program.

To comply with the terms of this legislation, an assistance dog must be well-behaved and under the control of the partner or trainer. By definition, the ADA therefore recognizes the importance of proper socialization for dogs. It acknowledges that dogs who will be expected to function with decorum in the human environment must be able to experience full exposure to that environment and practice the skills needed to function there. The ADA addresses the importance of trainers preparing dogs to accompany people in need, not only by teaching the dogs the behaviors required to assist their partners, but also by teaching the dogs how to conduct themselves in public. Assistance dogs in training and in service wear jackets or vests to identify them when they're out in public; trainers and partners refer to this as "being dressed."

As the owner of a family or companion dog, you do not have the same public-access rights. Therefore, you and your dog will not have the same rights as a disabled person and their dog to enter a supermarket, a retail store, or a restaurant. But you will not need your dog to accompany you to all of these types of places, as disabled partners do.

You can expose your pup, or maybe your young dog, to all the situations where you will need your dog to behave as an adult. If you own a dog with whom you plan to compete in agility, for instance, you want a dog who can stay with you in a motel room, as my dogs do when I travel to an agility trial away from home. If you rent a house at the beach every summer, you want a dog who will not damage items in an unfamiliar environment and who can walk on the beach without bothering other people or dogs. If your brother's family comes to visit and they want to bring along their well-behaved family dog, you want a dog who will not be aggressive to polite canine visitors.

There are plenty of opportunities to expose your dog to environments that will be a part of his life—*if* he can conduct himself in a socially acceptable manner.

Therapy Dogs

Federal law does not define the term "therapy dogs." Usually, they are personal pets who work with their owners to provide friendship and the therapeutic benefits of contact with animals to a wide variety of people. They are not limited to working with people with disabilities, but may also help hospital patients, retirement-village or nursing-home residents, prisoners, and even provide assistance with remedial reading programs in public schools.

Unlike assistance dogs, therapy dogs do not have specific goals that define their work with people. They are not asked to improve their partner's physical mobility by picking up dropped objects or to be able to dial 911 on a special

telephone in an emergency. Therapy dogs offer the simple emotional benefits of contact with animals by visiting with those who appreciate animals but do not have access to them. The visits are most often arranged by the recreational therapist or activity director in an institution, rather than by the medical or rehabilitation staff, and much of the visit content may be spontaneous.

The Delta Society, an international not-for-profit organization of pet owners, volunteers, therapists, educators, veterinarians, and others, provides training and support to therapy dog handlers. Founded in 1977, it registers therapy dog teams who have been screened and are prepared to conduct pet therapy work. In its *Team Training Course Manual*, Delta identifies some of the benefits that can accrue from therapy dog visits:

- Entertainment and amusement: There's nothing like a few silly dog tricks to get lonely or sick people chuckling.
- Mental stimulation: People may recall fond memories of their own pets.
- Human socialization: People laugh and interact with one another in the presence of friendly, happy dogs.
- Pleasant touch: Petting a friendly dog is a safe, non-threatening, and non-painful touching interaction.
- Outward focus: Patients are encouraged to focus on the dogs rather than on themselves.

Therapy dogs can be purebreds or mixed breeds, and come in all sizes and types. Their owners may have acquired them from a breeder, from a shelter, or even as a stray. They all have a few things in common: They love to be in the company of people, and they have been socialized by their owners to act appropriately in the therapy environment; and their owners have the unselfish desire to help other people by sharing the companionship of their own dogs with those who also love dogs but do not have one.

Therapy dogs must function in a challenging environment. In a nursing home, for instance, the floors are slippery, the air smells of medicine and disinfectant, and there may be scraps of food or even a dropped pill on the floor. It might be hotter than the dog is used to. Usually, several therapy dog teams visit together as a group. Each dog must accept the presence of the other dogs and handlers, and might have to tolerate close contact such as riding the elevator with another team or two. Elderly residents with declining motor skills might pet them a bit awkwardly. People might go by in wheelchairs or with walkers. In the midst of all of this activity, the dogs might be asked to walk around wearing a Halloween costume and politely "shake hands" with each of

these strangers. And, of course, the handlers can't jerk their dogs around for misbehaving, raise their voices, or chase their runaway dogs around the facility.

Therapy dogs might know only a few signals for a few simple tricks, but they must know how to conduct themselves properly in this highly complex human environment. They have not been bred specifically for a therapy dog program, they have not been trained by a professional assistance dog trainer, and they have not been required to learn any complex behaviors, other than what their owners think might be amusing or helpful. They are everyday dogs and members of everyday families who have been socialized by everyday owners who have included a managed, positive-outcome socialization program in their dog's basic training. Many therapy dogs do not begin their work until later in their lives. But due to the good socialization they received in preparation for therapy work, they can take on this new activity and flourish.

ROBBIE AND JANE

About a year ago, Robbie's mom met with Karen Hough, a private assistance dog trainer in southwest Virginia. Karen has short, strawberry blond hair and piercing blue eyes, and she impresses me most with her soft-spoken, collected demeanor when working with dogs. Karen is a veteran dog trainer who has worked on the staff of a service dog foundation and has taught dog obedience classes in the area. Recently, she launched her own professional dog training business, Field of Dreams Dog Training.

Robbie's mother hired Karen to teach them how to refine Jane's behavioral training, add new behaviors to her list of skills, and socialize her so that she can accompany Robbie in public as an asset rather than as a liability. Occasionally, Jane stays with Karen for a few days for more intensive training. Karen refers to Jane's developing canine social skills as the dog's "life skills."

On a cool day in early spring, I accompanied Karen and Jane (who was wearing a balance harness that Robbie uses to steady himself) to a strip mall where she had taken Jane for training the day before. "Yesterday, Jane did a fine job in Best Buy and in Staples," says Karen. "But, she lost it in PetSmart, where I was requiring her to behave herself and give me a couple of specific behaviors despite the presence of other, unfamiliar dogs in the store. I could tell she was a bit stressed, so we're here today to work through the problem."

Karen described Jane's training as "late stage training," which means training a dog who has already learned good social skills but still needs to polish those skills a bit further. She described how well Jane had proceeded through the social skills training, which allows her to accompany Robbie almost everywhere he goes. Actually, after watching Karen and Jane in PetSmart, I thought

Jane was by far the most polite and controlled dog in the shop. Most people would think of her as a highly socialized dog. But Karen had read the subtle signs of stress and lack of focus in Jane the day before, and knew she needed to help Jane work through these issues to improve her performance. "Losing it" to Karen did not mean Jane was lunging at other dogs in the store, barking incessantly, or pulling hard on the leash. It meant that in that environment, Jane was not quite able to provide a couple of behaviors when Karen asked for them. Karen never raised her voice above a soft, conversational level in the store, nor did she jerk Jane's collar or manhandle the dog in any way during the training session.

"Probably, I will be keeping an eye on this boy and his dog for the dog's whole life," says Karen. "His mother will want me to watch for slips in training or social skills that need supporting. Any owner can do it, but in Robbie's case, the results are so positive I think I'll be working with them into the future."

How assistance and therapy dog trainers socialize dogs so thoroughly, customize the training for each specific dog, recognize the need for further training, and turn out highly companionable animals, one after another, from all types of backgrounds, is the story of this book.

Happily, the story of Jane and Robbie and Robbie's mom has been transformed from a melodrama into a tale about the value of canine service. It's also a story about the mutual joy of companionship experienced between a boy and his dog.

You and your dog can live that same kind of story.