



Understanding the Service Dog Journey

EDUCATE. PREPARE. PARTNER. EMPOWER.



Every service dog team has a unique story. Education and preparation help build a strong foundation for a successful partnership.



BEFORE YOU BEGIN



Understand Your Needs

Every disability and every individual is unique. Understanding your goals helps determine if a service dog may be right for you.



Choose the Right Dog

Temperament, confidence, health, and trainability are often more important than breed alone.



Training Takes Time

Reliable service dogs are developed through patience, consistency, and ongoing training.



Financial Commitment

Consider the lifelong costs of training, care, equipment, grooming, and routine expenses.



Partnership Matters

A service dog is more than a helper—they become a trusted teammate. Communication, trust, and consistency are key.



Education Never Ends

Learning continues throughout your journey. Every team grows together through lifelong learning.

UNDERSTANDING SERVICE DOGS



Task Training

Service dogs are individually trained to perform specific tasks that directly assist a person with a disability.



Temperament

A calm, confident, and stable temperament is one of the most important qualities in a successful service dog.



Public Access

Public access requires extensive training, reliability, and appropriate behavior in many different environments.



Health

Healthy dogs are better equipped to perform the physical and mental demands of service work.



Daily Life

Even working dogs need time to play, rest, exercise, and simply be dogs.



Teamwork

Success depends on the relationship between the handler and the dog—not just training alone.



Lifelong Learning

Training doesn't stop after placement. Skills should be practiced throughout the dog's working life.



Every Journey Is Unique

No two service dog teams look exactly alike. Progress looks different for everyone.

SERVICE DOG • THERAPY DOG • EMOTIONAL SUPPORT ANIMAL

SERVICE DOG	THERAPY DOG	EMOTIONAL SUPPORT ANIMAL
Individually trained to perform disability-related tasks	Provides comfort and support to others in schools, hospitals, nursing homes, and community settings	Provides emotional support to its owner
Works with one handler	Visits many people through organized programs	Supports one individual
Extensive task training and public access preparation	Evaluated for temperament and suitability for visits	Does not require specialized task training
Different legal protections and responsibilities	Access depends on the facility or program	Legal protections differ from service dogs



Remember: Every working or support dog serves an important purpose. Understanding the differences helps promote respect, appropriate expectations, and responsible stewardship.

BUILDING A SUCCESSFUL SERVICE DOG TEAM

1



Understand Your Needs

2



Choose the Right Dog

3



Build Strong Foundations

4



Practice Public Access

5



Strengthen Your Partnership

6



Continue Growing Together

COMMON MYTHS



Myth: Any friendly dog can become a service dog.

Reality: Service work requires exceptional temperament, health, extensive training, and reliability.



Myth: A vest makes a dog a service dog.

Reality: Equipment does not determine whether a dog is a service dog. Training and disability-related tasks are what define a service dog.



Myth: Service dogs work all day without breaks.

Reality: Working dogs still need rest, exercise, play, and opportunities to simply be dogs.



Myth: Service dogs never make mistakes.

Reality: Like people, dogs continue learning throughout their lives and benefit from regular practice and reinforcement.



QUESTIONS TO ASK A PROGRAM OR TRAINER

- ✓ How are dogs evaluated for temperament?
- ✓ What training methods do you use?
- ✓ How are dogs matched with handlers?
- ✓ What support is available after placement?
- ✓ How long does the training process typically take?
- ✓ What expenses should I expect?
- ✓ What happens if a dog is not successful?
- ✓ What ongoing education is provided?



GREEN FLAGS TO LOOK FOR

- ✓ Humane, science-based training
- ✓ Thorough temperament evaluations
- ✓ Transparent communication
- ✓ Realistic expectations
- ✓ Ongoing handler education
- ✓ Continued support after placement
- ✓ Focus on the handler-dog partnership
- ✓ Commitment to the dog's long-term well-being



RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT



Understanding the Service Dog Journey

Download our free educational guide covering preparation, training, choosing the right dog, and building a successful partnership.

DOWNLOAD GUIDE



EVERY JOURNEY IS DIFFERENT

Some individuals receive a fully trained service dog through an organization. Others owner-train with professional guidance. Some begin with a carefully selected puppy, while others partner with an adult dog. There is no single path that fits everyone. What matters most is making informed decisions, building a strong partnership, and ensuring both the handler's needs and the dog's well-being remain at the center of the journey. At Tethered By Grace, we believe education empowers individuals to choose the path that's right for them.



NEED MORE GUIDANCE?

Beginning the service dog journey can feel overwhelming, and every person's path is unique. While this page provides general educational information, some individuals and families benefit from additional guidance as they explore service dog options, training pathways, ethical sourcing, and long-term planning. That's why Tethered By Grace created Guided By Grace—a dedicated initiative designed to help individuals and families navigate the service dog journey through trusted education, compassionate support, and meaningful connections.



LEARN ABOUT GUIDED BY GRACE



Education empowers.
Partnerships change lives.



Tethered By Grace Inc. is a 301(c)(3) nonprofit organization.
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