



Doggy Do-Gooders

Comforting the elderly and donating blood for other dogs are just a few ways your pooch can morph into a model citizen.

WRITER **Stephen C. George**



Enlist your pet in the READ program and help a child foster a love of reading.

Nancy Brooks is crazy about two things: dogs and books. She never imagined she'd be able to combine the two until she heard about Reading Education Assistance Dogs, a program where volunteers and their pets visit schools and libraries, mentoring kids who need help with reading and communications skills.

The READ method is simple: Instead of reading aloud to a teacher or classroom, which can be intimidating, the child reads to the dog. This makes kids less self-conscious and creates a fun and rewarding opportunity for everyone.

"I thought it was the coolest idea ever," Nancy says. So in 2005, Nancy and her Shetland sheepdog, Sassy, started a READ group in their hometown of Minneapolis. Their crew now includes dozens of volunteer teams.

"We've done zillions of library and school visits," Nancy says. "I so enjoy being with the children and being able to share Sassy with them. What's fantastic about this program is the seeds we're planting for the love of reading. And there are other benefits for the kids, too: They have increased self-esteem, participate more in class, and develop a deep respect for animals." Not a bad way to spend an afternoon with your dog.

As Nancy discovered, there are plenty of ways to combine a love of animals with a desire to help others in need, both in your community and beyond. Give these ideas a go:

Bring a service dog home

Many groups train dogs for a variety of needs: guiding the blind, helping people with autism or seizure disorders, or providing companionship for those who need it. But training groups seldom have the resources to care for the dogs while they're still in puppyhood. That's where foster families come in. Volunteers open their homes to young service dogs, teach basic obedience and provide care until the dogs are old enough to go back for final training and placement with their future owners. It's OK if you have kids or other pets; in fact, it's generally preferred, since it helps the dogs adapt to different situations.

Generally, foster families have their dogs for about a year. If you go this route, you'll spend about 30 minutes a day training the dog, take it out in public places weekly, and attend fostering classes once or twice a month. Many classes are at the organization's headquarters, so you need to be within realistic traveling distance. For example, Assistance Dogs of America Inc. (adai.org), which provides dogs to children and adults with

Doo Good
 Help your pet do something good by picking up that poop instead of letting it get washed into the gutter. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, pet waste is a significant cause of water contamination. Dog feces carry a whole, *ahem*, crapload of harmful bacteria, including streptococcus and salmonella that can make their way into water supplies. So buy yourself a scooper or carry a bag, and pick it up when your dog drops it off. It's gross, but which would you rather: Pick it up now or drink it later?

TIP



HOME AWAY FROM HOME

Take care of your best friend while out and about.

FIND

Do a Web search to find parks that allow dogs and get park rules and hours.

CHECK

Get the forecast to avoid severe weather or extreme temperatures.

PREP

Make sure your dog has a collar with proper ID, up-to-date vaccinations and is protected with **K9 Advantix® II**. It not only kills fleas and ticks, it also repels most ticks they might pick up while out.



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FRESH LIVING

physical and developmental disabilities, needs families within 150 miles of its headquarters in Swanton, Ohio. California's Guide Dogs for the Blind places puppies in homes across eight Western states. Programs typically help defray veterinary expenses and provide food and supplies, so the big investment on your part is time and love. For more information about service programs near you, visit the Assistance Dogs International website (assistancedogsinternational.org) and click on Member Programs.



Animal-assisted therapy programs are at the heart of Delta Society's Pet Partners program.

Fetch some therapy

Unlike service animals, which are trained to do specific tasks for someone with a disability, therapy animals provide contact for those who need a little attention from a furry pal. Organizations like Therapy Dogs Inc. (therapydogs.com) or Therapy Dogs International (tdi-dog.org) register dogs of all sizes and breeds to visit assisted-living facilities, hospices, hospitals, shelters, schools—and libraries, where READ teams like Nancy and Sassy happily volunteer.

To be a certified therapy animal, your dog has to pass some tests, including an evaluation of his behavior around adults and kids of both genders, as well as people who use wheelchairs or crutches. Depending on the program, you and your pet may be able to do a small amount of specialized training at home. (For example, Nancy trained Sassy to look at a book's pages as someone read to her, a trick accomplished with a few strategically placed treats.) The process can take weeks or even a few months.

Before signing up, consider your dog's temperament. Is it outgoing and friendly to all people? Is it tolerant of other dogs

(of both genders) and nonaggressive toward other pets? "Many dogs are suitable to be certified, and it's amazingly rewarding for both the owner and the dog," says Nancy.

Dogs may mark the biggest therapy-animal territory, but they don't own all of it. Delta Society, a nonprofit therapy-animal organization, helps train other pets. READ programs across the nation include cats, birds, guinea pigs, rabbits, horses and even llamas. Find out even more at deltasociety.org.

Give blood

We humans always hear how important it is to donate blood, but animal hospitals need it, too. A donation from one cat or dog could save as many as three or four others. In the past, vets relied on staff-owned pets for the transfusions required during surgery, but animal blood banks—in Michigan, Texas, Virginia, Florida, California and elsewhere—depend on local volunteers. The process takes about 20 minutes. Contact your vet to find a donation center near you, or to ask about local donor needs.

Finally, if you and your pet can't commit to volunteering just now, no need to be hangdog about it. The organizations and programs mentioned in this story all welcome financial donations. ✨

FRESH FACE



When shopping, look for pet stores with ties to animal rescue groups or shelters. We found a local store that donates its profits to a rescue organization. Going a little out of our way to shop there feels worthwhile.

—Andrea Keller, Asheville, North Carolina