

On the Positive Side (Aug. 8)

By Kathryn Rosenthal / For the Sun-News

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How should we act near a service dog? There's a T-shirt for sale on the Internet with instructions on the front explaining how to behave around a service dog and its handler.

Do disabled people really need to wear a list of do's and don'ts when they are in public with their service dogs? I hope not! And yet, many people are a little uncomfortable when we see a working service dog.

Here's a basic truth: people care. It's that simple. But, in our desire to interact with a person with a disability, to show our "better angels" and our support for that person, it's easy to cross the line and behave inappropriately. No one wants to be the object of pity or to have their personal space invaded.

Are you ready to take two short tests? O.K., let's begin the first test:

You're in a store. You see a woman using a wheelchair or scooter; she has a service dog with her. The woman is a stranger to you.

Answer "yes" or "no." Is it OK to ...

1. Hug the dog? Hug the woman?
2. Pet or feed the dog? Pat the woman on the head or try to kiss her?
3. Hit the dog? Grab the woman's shoulder and shake her back-and-forth?
4. Yell at the dog? Yell at the woman?
5. Run up and try to grab the woman's purse?

ALL of the above have happened to my service dog and to me. Some experiences involved angry children or mentally challenged adults. Yet, they all happened.

And, in case you're keeping score, the answer is NO to each of the questions. They are not acceptable behaviors.

In fact, interfering with a service dog and its handler is against the law and you may be guilty of a misdemeanor or a gross misdemeanor. Remember, federal law protects the service dog and its handler.

The second test is harder, so I'll help by giving you the answers. Is it OK to ...

1. Make eye contact with the dog and talk to it? No, the dog is working; don't distract it.
2. Talk to the handler? It depends. Remember, the dog and handler are a working team and both are focused on what they need to do.
3. Offer to help the handler? Probably. Many disabled people appreciate kind strangers offering to open heavy doors and to reach items on high shelves for them, even when they are with their service dog. Talk to the handler, not to the dog.
4. Ask the handler what his or her disability is? No, that's private. Basic life activities can often be very difficult for a disabled person: bathing, dressing, eating, etc. Having a stranger ask, "What's wrong with you?" can be disheartening - and it happens a lot.
5. Ask someone who has brought a dog into my business if it is a service dog? Yes, you are legally allowed to ask the

following questions: "Is that a service dog? Are you disabled?" Note: do not ask what the person's disability is.

Thanks for taking the tests. Now I won't need to buy the T-shirt and you'll know how to act around a service dog.

People care. We can all be thankful for the kindness of strangers, but everyone needs to act appropriately.

Want to read more? The U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, Disability Rights Section website is: www.justice.gov/crt/drs/drshome.php

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