

# The Training of Toy Dogs for Therapy Dog Work

*Interview/Article by Sherry Davis, TDI Evaluator (Bakersfield, California)*

I've got this old threadbare t-shirt that I've managed to hold on to for over 40 years; most notably for its broken-in-fits-like-second-skin comfort, but also because after an equal number of years training dogs, I still get a kick out of the graphic displayed on the front: "The only thing two dog trainers agree on is what a third trainer is doing is wrong". Easy to agree with that sentiment when the training methodology of today's new-age dog trainer proclaims that as a "pet parent" we should enrich our dogs' lives by ignoring blatant disobedience, avoid correcting dogs for fear of bruising their delicate canine feelings and that an never-ending supply of treats is all that is needed to obtain desired behaviors. Happily, my faith that a profession which has been my whole life has not fallen into a bottomless pit of anthropomorphism was recently given a re-boot during a conversation with Margaretta Patton on the training of toy dogs for therapy work.

## Interviewing of Margaretta Patton (May 20 & 27, 2016)

Margaretta (Maggie to her friends) has been an AKC obedience judge for over 35 years, a TDI evaluator since the '90's and has been doing educational programs for schools and children groups since the '80's. Having started in Pomeranians, she now trains and shows Toy Poodles.

### **Maggie, do you find any parts of the TDI test to be more challenging for toy dogs?**

1. Due to their size, approaching the service equipment can be a little scary, but they certainly can be trained to work comfortably around the different pieces of equipment.
2. The "leave it" command is generally difficult for most breeds and sizes of dogs, and it's especially hard when the treat is offered by the helper.
3. People standing over toy dogs has always presented a challenge.

### **Maggie, do you have any specific tips or advice about training toy dogs?**

1. I do a lot of play training, teaching sit, down and stand on my bed. My poodle weighs 7 lbs, and play-downs on the bed are non-threatening and help build confidence. It's also easier on the handler's back!
2. There needs to be a leader in the relationship, and dogs large and small need parameters for their behavior.
3. Work on your voice. Most people don't use their voice properly; they praise in a monotone. Your voice is a tool which can be used to motivate, caution or reward extra effort. While food can be used to highlight an exceptional performance in practice, since it can't be used in the ring or while doing therapy work, praise should always be the primary re-enforcer for a dog.

### **Maggie, what advice would you give newly certified toy handler teams?**

1. Watch your dog at all times! Be especially vigilant when working with teenagers or psychiatric/special needs children who can be too rough with tiny dogs. Keep your eyes on hands which can pinch testicles, squeeze feet too hard or stick a finger down a dog's ear canal. Don't let children pick up your dog, pick it up yourself and hold it for petting.
2. Therapy work is not a social event. Don't stand around chatting with facility workers or your friends. Watch your dog.

### **Maggie, what are some of the mistakes people make when raising toy dogs?**

1. Waiting too long to start training. Although performance won't become consistent until around the age of four years, training using play techniques can begin when dogs are puppies.
2. Not correcting play biting/nipping.
3. Not confining puppies when unsupervised until they are mature enough to be trusted.
4. Stepping on tiny feet. Shuffle your feet when you walk.
5. Broken legs. Slipping a finger through an over-enthusiastic puppy's collar when it is being held can prevent a serious fall.
6. Not socializing to outside world.
7. Over-dependence on food for performance.

### **Finally, Maggie and I discussed "burn-out" which is not unique to toy breeds.**

While seasoned therapy dog handlers are instinctively tuned to their dog's physical and psychological needs, newer handlers often have a tendency to go "overboard" when starting in therapy work. In their enthusiasm to fill up their visit log by knocking off that first 50 visits, handlers often over-work their dogs. While one of the reasons for doing therapy work may be because the handler's dog loves attention, many dogs (especially toys) can be overwhelmed at first by all the petting and touching, so it's important to pace dogs until you've learned to read the signs that they've reached their limit or run the risk of burning them out.

**Thank you Maggie, for this is great information that should be helpful to new and old handlers alike.**

\*\*\*\*\**Sherry: But I still won't be doing any Newfoundland training on my bed!*\*\*\*\*\*