

17

Raising Piper

Training an Assistance Dog for a Child with a Developmental Disability

Rachel Friedman

When a dog runs at you, whistle for him.—Henry David Thoreau

This chapter is about raising and training a puppy for a role of assistance dog for a child with a developmental disability, from the selection process through the first sixteen weeks of the pup's life. This chapter is not designed to cover in detail the critical preselection process, which is often overlooked by many people and organizations that wish to locate a puppy to train for assistance work.

In the case of Piper, the golden puppy we raised for North Star, this prior research was done. North Star Foundation had carefully bred Piper and her littermates to possess temperaments conducive to working with children with a variety of challenges. From the moment Piper was born, her socialization process had begun; she was carefully nurtured and socialized with lots of gentle handling from a large variety of people. Piper was handpicked from this golden litter to work for a young boy named Devin, who has Down's syndrome, due to her intelligence, sociability and exceedingly calm nature. The most important point to consider when pairing a puppy with a child with a developmental disability is the concept of temperamental fit: in this

case, although Devin was very attracted to dogs in general, he was extremely sensitive to sensory input and quite fearful of quick or sudden movements. A dog that is loud and active would hurt Devin more than help him, and so a calm and sensitive puppy was found who had the intelligence and desire to pay close attention to Devin's cues. (Conversely, a child who is loud and active would not necessarily do well with a timid, sedate pup.) The other members of the family also need to be considered, especially the siblings. Although every member of the family can potentially benefit from the arrival of an assistance dog, each member also has the potential to cause a placement to go south. Parents must consider themselves partners with puppy raisers and trainers in order to create the most valuable and safe placement possible.

We're going to presuppose you've already done your homework and that you have selected the perfect puppy for your family. Let's imagine the pup is nine weeks old. This doesn't take much imagination on my part, as that's where I am now as I await the arrival of Piper, the golden retriever assistance-dog-in-training who is coming to begin her first formal training experience after leaving her mother and siblings. She is flying with Patty Dobbs Gross, executive director of North Star Foundation, in the bulkhead of an airplane. She has already had weeks of handling, stimulation, exposure, affection, and nurturing; Devin and his brother David have known Piper since she opened her eyes. The boys will be seeing Piper's brother Buddy on a regular basis while Piper is with us. They are very much on my mind as I drive to the airport to pick up Piper.


What do I have besides an overwhelming sense of excitement that a naive bundle of fur is heading west to find adventure? Healthy food and water bowls, new toys, a crate, a leash, several kinds of collars, a vet relationship, and lots of plans to prepare her for her future career.

It is now the morning of the first full day of Piper's presence in my home. She has successfully met and charmed all she has come across, something I anticipate she'll be doing almost daily for the rest of her life. Two other dogs in the household have already sized her up, the six cats that drape themselves over countertops have lifted their heads in greeting; a young kitten with a heart murmur daintily steps up to touch Piper's nose with hers. My husband and three daughters—ages 3, 6, and 9—have already fallen in love. Piper will be here through all three kids' birthdays, the rest of this fall, a full winter, and possibly into the beginning of spring. It was significant that on her first night here tornadoes and unprecedented thunderstorms ripped through the area: bright bolts of lightning, claps of thunder, drenching rain, and high winds. Through it all, Piper remained unflappable. A definite good sign.

her body up and goes for the toy, collapses again on the floor and gnaws the toy. I instruct my kids, under my supervision, to pet her head, stroke her body, tug gently at her tail, “coochy coo” under her furry chin. All the while she remains, as always, unflappable. It is interesting to me that of my three girls, the youngest is the most natural with dogs and really enjoys helping train. While the older two are comfortable and enjoy dogs too, it is the youngest who is most outgoing with animals. I am struck by what an important role she is playing in shaping Piper to accept children as leaders. Devin will be primed to step up to this role in just a few short months.

Now 12 weeks old, Piper weighs in at 20 pounds. She has one month left of puppyhood. We continue finding balance between activity and rest. While I want Piper to have great experiences and exposure, I also want to make sure, as she’s in the heavy growing phase, that she’s not overly exerting herself. For the medium- to larger-sized dog, it’s always a wise idea to follow a trusted vet’s advice about rate of growth. While genetics is a big part of the skeletal growth, early puppy development and exercise is also a factor, and so I make an effort to balance out her play and exercise with calm resting activities like bully stick chewing, sleeping beside the fire, and cuddling.

Despite the fact that Piper is being heavily socialized to children, dogs, cats, birds, and grand adventures, I also felt it would be a good idea to enroll her in a Puppy Kindergarten class with myself as the student instead of the instructor. And so Piper began her Puppy Kindergarten class at the age of 14 weeks in a large training center with lots of space and rubberized matting. In the first session there were ten other puppies and about fifteen people; included as the students were shy pups, confident pups, overly exuberant bouncy pups, all varieties of breeds, and all less than four months of age.



In our initial class Piper was overwhelmed with the social element and deferred to me whenever she felt stressed or confused, which I liked. As her ultimate goal is to become an assistance dog she needs to learn to defer to her handler and display a calm, stable affect in all social situations, even and especially when being overwhelmed. (Patty reported that when faced with the jostling and noise of her first plane ride, Piper either sat attentively at her feet or curled up to sleep through the unpleasantness. These reactions Patty naturally reinforced.)

Two weeks later in the second class Piper showed a much improved attitude socially and engaged one or two of the other pups in the class. She excelled at recall and came flying over towards me to lie down expectantly at my feet. (She was heavily rewarded for that choice!)

Rachel Friedman combines her passion for and long experience in working with animals with her extensive social work training and work experience. She became a full-time dog trainer in 1999. Her background makes her uniquely qualified to help clients learn how best to teach their dogs, and thus how best to create a harmonious household. Rachel is a clinical member of the International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants (IAABC) and a professional member of the Association of Pet Dog Trainers (APDT); she also served as director of North Star during our formative years and helped to form our training philosophy.