

News Column for Use Week of 11/11/19
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Assistance Dog Etiquette

I have recently been following a family's work to incorporate a service dog into their daily lives on social media. It reminded me of how important my actions are when I encounter someone who has a service dog.

The first thing to remember is: the dog is working! Do not do anything to interrupt the dog from performing the job it is trained to do. Remember, the handler has the dog for a specific reason and their lives may literally depend upon the dog being tuned into them, not you, or any other distractions in the surroundings. As I travel, I am always amazed at a service dog's ability to tune out all of the noise in even the busiest airport and continue to work the job it is trained to do.

I have picked up the following Assistance Dog Etiquette Tips from KSDS, and I thought they were good reminders for us all.

Don't be afraid of the dog. Many people are naturally cautious around or afraid of dogs. However, service dogs are from parent lines that have been proven to be of exceptionally good temperament. The puppies are raised and trained in environments where they are socialized with animals and people, and then they are trained to have excellent manners.

Don't touch the dog without asking permission! Yes, the dogs are always beautiful and well-groomed and it is tempting to reach out to pet them. However, this is a distraction and may prevent the dog from tending to their human partner. Beyond that, the dog is a part of the human partner's personal space and one should never invade that space without permission.

Never feed the dog! The dog is likely on a specific diet, so eating something out of the ordinary, especially human food, may upset the digestive tract and result in the dog being less attentive to the human partner.

Speak to the person, not the assistance dog. Most handlers do not mind talking about their dog if they have the time. Keep in mind, however, some people are very private, they may not be comfortable talking to complete strangers, or you may be the 100th person who has asked them about their dog today. If you sense they do not want to talk then please respect that, politely compliment the handler on their beautiful dog, wish them a good day, and move on.

Do not whistle or make sounds to the dog. Attempts you make to get the dog's attention may be a distraction for the dog which is dangerous to the human partner.

Finally, never make assumptions about the human handler. There are a number of reasons why an assistance dog is needed, and it is inconsiderate on our part to assume anything about their intelligence, feelings, or capabilities. Remember, it is an invasion of the human partner's privacy if we ask them why they have the dog. Some may share in conversation, but it is not our place to ask.

I want to remind everyone the Americans with Disabilities Act guarantees people with disabilities the right to be accompanied by an assistance dog in all areas open to the general public.