

Dos and Don'ts for Behavior around a Service Dog

From an email from Antioch University sent to student listserv on 9-11-19

DO speak to the owner/handler rather than the dog.

The service dog and her handler are a team. If you want to talk to them, always speak to the person first rather than automatically approaching the dog. Remember, the animal is working, and her human's life could depend on her staying focused on her job.

DON'T be offended if a service dog handler will not let you pet the dog or if the handler and dog doesn't stop to chat with you.

The dog is working and both the dog and the handler are concentrating to get where they need to go.

DO offer help but do not insist.

Service dog handlers are very appreciative of others who ask them if they need help. If you think a service dog handler may need help, ask before assisting. If the service dog handler says no, don't take it personally.

DON'T touch the dog without asking permission first.

Touching or petting a working dog is a distraction and may prevent him from tending to his human partner. The dog may be in the process of completing a command or direction given by his human, and you don't want to interfere. Fortunately, most service dogs are trained to stay in work mode until they receive a release command from their handler. That's why many service dogs are able to ignore outside influences.

DON'T offer food to a service dog.

According to Canine Companions for Independence, "Food is the ultimate distraction to the working dog and can jeopardize the working assistance dog team." Not only are food and treats a potential distraction, but many service dogs are fed a specific diet and often on a specific schedule.

DO treat the owner/handler with sensitivity and respect.

Asking a service dog's handler personal questions about his or her disability is out of bounds. It's disrespectful and an intrusion of privacy. Assume the service dog team can handle things themselves. If you sense they could use your help, ask first. And don't take it personally if your offer is rejected, as there's usually a good reason.

DON'T assume a napping service dog is off duty.

All dogs nap, including working dogs. When her handler is sitting or standing for some length of time, it's perfectly natural and appropriate for a service dog to catch a few winks. She's still technically at work, however, so all dos and don'ts remain in effect.

DO inform the handler if a service dog approaches you.

If a working dog approaches you, sniffs or nudges you, etc., politely let the handler know. Resist the urge to respond to the dog - the handler will correct the dog.