

8 Dos and Don'ts for Behavior Around a Service Dog Team

1 **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.

2 **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.

3 **DO** keep your own dog a distance away from a working dog

If you happen to have your dog with you when you encounter a service dog team, don't allow your pet to approach them without first talking with the handler to see if it's permissible. Other animals are an obvious distraction to working dogs, and in a worst-case scenario, there could be an altercation between the two animals.

4 **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."¹ Not only are food and treats a potential distraction, but many service dogs are fed a specific diet and often on a specific schedule.

5 **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.

6 **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.

7 **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.

8 **DON'T** assume service dogs never get to 'just be dogs'

Working dogs typically get plenty of R&R and playtime. When they're home and out of their "work clothes," they're free to behave like any other dog. Since the jobs these wonderful animals do are often challenging and stressful, their handlers recognize they need plenty of downtime and exercise.