



Zorgbeest

1. Selection of the dog

- Age:
 - Dogs should be a minimum of 2 years old, the age of social maturity in dogs (Lefebvre et al, 2008). Good working dogs need time to develop emotional control.
 - Younger dogs may also participate in less demanding sessions. Such sessions could, for example, be used as part of the socialisation of puppies.
 - Dogs need a well-earned rest from around the age of 8 years or when they first start showing signs of difficulties with AAI. Older dogs are less able to cope with social stress factors (Horvath et al., 2008).
 - On the one hand, no longer using older dogs in AAI would be ideal, but on the other hand it can also be stressful when the dog has been used to participating in AAI and there is a sudden, radical change in the daily routine or activities. When a dog does become too old to continue to participate in AAI sessions, tapering off participation is recommended before stopping entirely.
- Breed:
 - The selection of an AAI dog is based mainly on the dog's temperament and experience, in part on the training, but very little on the breed.
 - Labradors and Golden Retrievers are breeds often chosen as assistance dogs. This is due to their very social, friendly and open nature. They are intelligent, learn quickly and score well in obedience competitions. They are tolerant, stable and enjoy being involved with all kinds of daily activities. However, this certainly does not mean that all Labradors and Golden Retrievers are friendly and stable or that other breeds are not suitable.
- Size:
 - Using a combination of both large and small breeds is preferable, as each fulfils a different role. Large dogs, for example, are more robust, making them often more suitable when working with groups of children.
- Temperament:
 - The ideal temperament for an AAI dog is:
 - calm, friendly and social, enjoys being around people;
 - obedient and listens the handler's cues;
 - attentive to the handler;
 - able to calm down easily after play and excitement;
 - able to remain calm for rather long periods of time;
 - able to walk around calmly in a busy environment;
 - able to ignore another dog with neutral body language.



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Some of these characteristics can be learned, but it is very important that the dog's nature (temperament) is respected.

- Behaviour tests can be helpful in determining the dog's temperament. Have a behaviour specialist carry out these tests. Ideally the test should be carried out in the environment where the dog will be working in the future.
- Experience and training
 - During the dog's socialisation period (until approximately 12 weeks of age) it is important that the dog has frequent, positive contact with people, other dogs, other animals and experiences different environments (ESAAT 2010: Principles for animal-assisted work with domestic animals and pets). Quality takes precedence over quantity: a couple of good quality experiences is more important than many bad quality experiences.
 - The dog must be correctly socialised without being overly saturated with stimuli.
 - Obedience training must be part of the preparations for AAI dogs (for therapy dogs in particular) (Coppinger, Coppinger & Skillings, 1998). The dog must have learned a minimum of the following skills:
 - basic cues such as "sit", "stay", etc. (Delta Society Evaluation Procedure);
 - attentive to the handler (Delta Society Evaluation Procedure);
 - interested in (unknown) people without getting overly excited (Delta Society Evaluation Procedure);
 - show no fearful-excited behaviour such as trying to escape, aggressiveness, jumping up on people or barking in an agitated manner (Delta Society Evaluation Procedure);
 - remain calm in a large group of people (Delta Society Evaluation Procedure);
 - remain sitting or standing without becoming nervous (Delta Society Evaluation Procedure).
 - It is not because a dog is well trained and used to many different situations that he or she never becomes stressed. In that case, it is important that the dog is able to show his or her emotions and that the handler recognises those signs of stress as quickly as possible so that he or she can remove the dog from the stressful situation.