**Chapter 6: Life of a Guide Dog**

In this chapter, we’ll talk about what your dogs’ lives have been like prior to being matched with you. They have been through many changes and it’s important to have an understanding of how this can affect your dog. We’ll touch on what behaviors you might see and how to interpret them, as well as some steps you can take to help ease your dogs’ transition into their new life with you.

Your dogs have had to make many adjustments in their short lives. All of the dogs you will be receiving were born at our Canine Development Center (CDC) in Patterson, New York. Socialization begins early with puppy massage and exposure outings within the facility for the whole litter. By 6 weeks of age, puppies have been weaned from their mother, the first big adjustment of their little lives. They also begin Home Socialization, heading out with one or two littermates into volunteers’ homes for a few days at a time. By ten weeks of age, each puppy is placed in a raiser home, where they typically stay for 12-18 months. Young puppies have an amazing capacity to adapt and all our pups have lots of positive experiences, but there are still many changes for them, nonetheless. Puppy Raiser families provide the first stable home and the puppies bond strongly with them as they grow and learn basic obedience, house manners, and how to be well behaved in public places. When the puppies return to Guiding Eyes as fully grown dogs, ready for their formal training, they have to adjust to living in a kennel environment instead of in a home with constant companionship. This can be stressful for them - they prefer being with people, because that is how they were raised. Trainers are then able to provide structure, physical exercise, mental stimulation and support to the dogs in their care. The dogs often bond quickly and strongly to their trainers. Dogs can spend 5-9 months or more in training before placement. They are then asked to adjust once again and to start considering you as their "person" rather than their trainer. Hopefully this will be the last adjustment they will have to make. It will be stressful to them, and it will be part of your job to help make this transition as easy as possible.

In addition to all the changes the dogs have been through to reach this point, your dogs have also had to pass a variety of tests. When they were very young puppies, they were given puppy temperament tests, and any puppy that did not show potential as a guide dog was released from the program at that stage. The puppies that were deemed potential guide dogs were placed in the raisers’ homes and evaluated frequently by Guiding Eyes staff members. They could be released from the program at any time for temperament problems or lack of confidence. Those that made it through the puppy raising program were then returned to Guiding Eyes and were taken through an “In-For-Training" test (or “IFT”), which is designed to test the dogs' confidence, general behavior, willingness to work with a handler, and how quickly they can recover from unexpected occurrences. Only after they have passed this test are dogs put into training with instructors. During their formal training, each dog is evaluated periodically with instructors working under blindfold. Supervisors observe the dog working in different environments, taking note of its proficiency as a guide as well as general behavior in and out of harness. Each dog must pass all of these tests and demonstrate that it is capable of working effectively as a guide in order to be considered as a candidate for placement.

Most of you have been waiting for many months to get your dogs and are understandably eager to meet and get to know them. Your dogs, on the other hand, have no idea what is about to happen to them. They have been in training for several months now, just enough time to settle into their routine and bond strongly to their instructors. They will not understand the new changes in their life and will likely seek the familiar support of their instructors during the first several days and maybe even longer. You may notice behaviors like whining/vocalizing, staring at the trainers, trying to follow trainers out the door, straining on the leash, wagging tails or breaking position when trainers are nearby. This is all quite normal, but it is vital to handle these behaviors in a positive manner that helps facilitate your own relationship with your dog, rather than undermines it. Attempt to engage and reassure your dog with a soft, encouraging tone of voice, call your dog’s name, make physical contact with them, or try engaging them with a fun game of “Touch”. Always reward your dog for choosing you over his trainer, even if you had to work at it a bit.

The more effort you can put into building your relationship with your new dog, the sooner you will see results. We’ll be talking more about relationship building in later chapters but remember that the only way to explain to your dogs what’s happening is to prove that you are now the most valuable person in their life. Strive to be as fair and consistent with them as possible, stay positive, and trust the process. Your instructors will be there to provide guidance every step of the way.

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