

# Process for Selecting Academy Recipients

## There is a highly structured system supporting this vital process

This project awards pups to deserving families and then teaches the family how to train the pup to be an Alert Service Dog. However, it is suggested reading for all Academy families, as it can be a good guide for self-examination, as it may suggest some changes in your family's life style which could ease the process or improve the probability of success.

This is a sobering task, as every applicant has real needs and is worthy of receiving a pup.

We find several facts that limit the number of families that we are able to support. The first constraint is available funding. Our project provides dogs at no charge to the recipient. Since good dogs will cost between \$1,000 and \$3,000, we are constrained by our ability to raise funds directly, or enlist sponsors to help fund dog purchases. A larger constraint is available manpower. For us, it is all volunteer labor and we have found that two volunteers can comfortably manage only about six families in training at any given time.

The way that our club manages this is first to solicit and accept written applications. When we have a need to add a family to the project, we first review all open applications, and then select three, or four, finalists. We then conduct home interviews with each finalist family, where everyone who will be in regular contact with the pup are required to attend. Finally, with the information gathered from the applications, home interviews and reference checks, a committee of three club members select the winning candidate. We do this with the help of a rather formal decision support process.

To avoid wasted effort on our part, as well as the family's, our decision process is designed to maximize success. The major factor in that evaluation is the child's understanding of the effort that will be required, and given that, does the child really want a dog? If there is not full commitment from the child, the dog will sense that and the bonding necessary for reliable alerts will never occur. We try to take a well-trained dog to the home visit and let the child handle it throughout the interview process. If any reluctance, or indifference is observed, there is little point in further consideration of this candidate.

Given that that critical parameter is positive, the other acceptance factors are summarized below.

Child's age. There are several things in play here. On the one hand, there is an urgency factor to provide support at an early age, when the child may not be able to self-diagnose. An opposing consideration is that a younger child may not be able, or willing, to take the responsibility for all of the tasks required to ensure the necessary bonding occurs. A related factor is the time since diagnosis. A family with a recently diagnosed child is under a great deal of pressure to adapt to the new responsibilities in their lives. Adding the stress of a new puppy in the home could be overwhelming. We have found that it is best to wait for about 1 year from diagnosis to add a new puppy to the mix,

Location stability. Joining our training "Academy" requires a two-year commitment. The simple truth is that some families are more mobile than others. Moving to a distant location within that two-year window creates problems for both parties. Home ownership is an indicator of stability. It is well known that some large corporations have a reputation for frequent personnel movement. These are things we watch for.

Family experience with dogs. Some experience with prior pets, especially puppies is important. The first time through raising a puppy can be frustrating! We will provide guidance, but nothing replaces hands-on experience. Since much of the training focuses on obedience, having taken one, or two, dogs through some formal obedience schooling, is a plus.

Financial need. This can be awkward, and we do not ask for financial data. However, all else being equal, we prefer that our dogs go to families that could not afford to purchase a commercially trained dog, with prices around \$20,000.

Home location. This is essentially a measure of how convenient and time consuming the regular trips to the training location is for the family. In spite of the best intentions, separations that require more than a one-hour trip, will result in poorer attendance. Our standard enrollment agreement specifies that attendance be 80%, or better, for the two-year training duration.

Ability of child to care for the dog. There could be physical conditions that limit the amount of care the child can provide. More likely, the child has numerous other activities that keep it more than busy. If we sense this to be the case, we must be sure the child understands the level of effort required and is willing to adjust priorities to insure there is time for the all-critical bonding attention.

Family enthusiasm and commitment. This is extremely critical! Although the child must take the lead in the critical bonding process, they must have the support of the entire family. It is almost universal to find the child saying something like "I didn't know it would be this much work". This can be a healthy recognition of what is required, or it could be a plea for help and support. If the later, the parents must not take over interactions with the pup, as that could destroy the dog/child bonding process. But they can provide emotional support and/or relieve the child of other duties competing for their time. The child must do the actual pup training, but typically younger children need an adult's advice regarding training techniques and methods. An important part of the commitment, for the entire family, is the extremely difficult task of ignoring that cute bundle of fur running around the house. Please note that bonding is difficult, but very possible with everyone's cooperation. However un-bonding an undesirable relationship is nearly impossible without long term physical separation of the pair.

Assessment of references. A major goal of this process is confirming that the applicant is legitimate and not an imposter seeking a free pup. However, discussions with medical personnel can provide useful information regarding the relative seriousness of the affliction. Frank discussion with references can also help quantify the level of commitment of the entire family.

Fenced yard. Self-explanatory! It is possible to succeed without one, but that puts an extra burden on all participants, as it is mandatory that the pup be on-leash at any time it is out of the home. This is information contained in the application, and typically, families without a fenced yard do not become finalists.

Home/yard suitability. For the home, this is primarily a question of space availability. Two kennels are advised; a large one in the recipient's bedroom, and a small one in the kitchen area. Neatness and cleanliness are also important indicators of suitability. At many home visits advice about puppy proofing is necessary. New dog owners need to understand that young puppies will eat anything. The yard inspection should confirm that the fence is puppy tight. They can slip through very small openings. Again, cleanliness and neatness are important indicators.

Interference from other pets. Here again, the family needs to be aware that other pets can be a distraction to the bonding process. Cats are generally OK. The house cat will usually establish, in no uncertain terms, the tolerable limits for a playful pup. Older larger breed dogs are similar, in that they will establish limits with the pup. It is the small breeds and younger dogs that present a potential problem. The pup just left an environment where it was closely bonded to its littermates. The pup could decide that your other pet was equivalent, and the other pet may reciprocate. The recipient family must understand that if this should occur, that they must find a temporary home for the pet for up to 6 months.

Self-diagnosis ability. Some people, including children, will sense their blood sugar status and be able to take corrective action. Others cannot do so. Clearly, this factor must be considered when prioritizing the candidates.

Communications Skills. Successful completion of this entire training process requires frequent communications between all parties. This ability is difficult to determine in advance. However, things like thoughtful information in the application, good questions during the home interview and prompt responses to emails in the scheduling process can be strong indicators of possible things to come.

In conclusion, the extra effort put into this phase will pay large dividends in the long run. We try to schedule the home interviews at least a couple of weeks before the scheduled puppy selection session. It is rare, but possible that none of the planned home visits produce an acceptable candidate, and this will give us time to re-group and schedule some new interviews. If all fails, we do not compromise our assessments by accepting a candidate with poor credentials. We would regret it for two years!