



# StubbyDog™

Rediscover the Pit Bull.

## A Tale of Two Therapy Dogs

**The author, a member of StubbyDog's Superhero Squad, discusses her two pit bulls and their work as therapy dogs**

*By Emily Douglas*

As an inherently romantic society, many of us love talking about how we were "born to" do something. "I was born to run." "He was born a gifted writer." "I was born to be a teacher." In reality, the only things we were born to do are eat, sleep, breathe and be social. And maybe play around on Facebook all day. And I guess that also falls under that social category.



### **Born to Teach?**

Similar to many professions, teaching seems to suffer from the popular notion that as long as you have some kind of inherent charisma, that all you need to do to is go to college, learn a few snazzy classroom tricks and voila ... you're a great teacher who's going to wow your students and help them soar to new heights like Jaime Escalante or Michelle Pfeifer. What Hollywood won't tell you, however, is that on average, most teachers really don't hit their stride and mature professionally until their fifth year of teaching. Learning to teach is an ongoing, lifelong process, not an end goal. Because finishing a degree or passing a test isn't like flipping a switch. It doesn't magically *make* you *something*. All we can ever do is use what we know to shape what we have, and constantly aspire towards professional and personal growth.



## Born to be a Therapy Dog?

The same is true for working dogs, whether they busy themselves with field trials, agility, therapy or service dog work, or just bringing you and your friends a [Bud Light from the fridge](#). No dog is born to do this kind of work, and not every dog can easily be taught to do this kind of work, both of which [Patricia McConnell](#) succinctly and thoughtfully explains in [a recent blog post on whether therapy dogs are born or made](#). Because great animal behaviorists and dog trainers like her know that dog behavior and truly successful training are about recognizing what's already there and shaping it. And not just shaping it until they're 18 months old, or 2 years old, but over a lifetime. Sure, many dogs are born with obvious genetic and individual inclinations toward one activity or another, but that alone does not guarantee success with that activity.

## Shaping and Assessing our Dogs

Right now, I have two young dogs who have been registered therapy dogs for a little over a year. Both dogs are rescued "pit bull" mixes who were rescued as very young puppies. And I see their training and development as an ongoing project and one that may very well not include both of them succeeding at therapy work at the same time, if at all.



One dog, [Peaches](#), was a submissive pee-er from 4 months to approximately 15 months of age. If the wind blew, she barked and peed. If you dropped a pan in the kitchen, she barked and peed. If she got too excited when new people said "Hello," she peed on them. Once we ran into a 10-pound Miniature Pincher dressed in a purple dog Snuggie on a walk, and she rolled over and peed all over herself. In addition to the peeing, things like unfamiliar buildings and new floor surfaces made her nervous. All of these things would signal to any animal behaviorist or trainer that this dog probably isn't therapy dog material.

The second dog, Buster, has been unflappable since the day we started fostering him. He has always been nonreactive to unfamiliar noises, places, people, dogs and experiences. He is highly food- and play-motivated, and the only thing he ever struggled with in obedience and therapy dog class was coming out of a stay once released because all he wanted to do was work more. He has always been affectionate and loving with us and our friends, and is a rather handsome, adorable fellow to boot.

Even though I hoped that both dogs might do well with therapy work, the reality seemed obvious. Peaches may very well never cross the threshold of a hospital building, let alone pass testing, and Buster appeared to be a natural. That was 15 months ago.



Today, it is Peaches who is thriving as a working therapy dog—and now a [StubbyDog Superhero Squad member](#) to boot—with regular visits to hospitals and schools, and even occasional participation in major nonprofit events with hundreds of people. Meanwhile, I’ve stopped going on formal therapy dog visits with Buster and do not intend to renew his registration next year. Because while Buster loves training, he doesn’t really enjoy the actual work. What happened? I successfully shaped Peaches’ behavior and am committed to maintaining it through ongoing learning opportunities. I have yet to do that with Buster and may ultimately decide that it is not in his best interest to do so.

### **Affiliative or Indifferent?**

The one factor I have yet to mention about Peaches is that the presence of human beings counteracts environmental factors that would otherwise make her nervous. She is both “affiliative” and “aware of her job” like [McConnell outlines here](#):

**“Affiliative:** This seems like a no-brainer, but the fact is that many dogs are presented for therapy work who really don’t like strangers all that much. They love their owners and good friends, but aren’t all that interested in other people. Good therapy dogs need to be the kind of dogs who ADORE people, all people, and want nothing more than to connect with them. It is, after all, the emotional connection that is often the therapeutic part of AAA and AAT.



It seems to me that dogs sort into four categories: 1) adore people, care little for other dogs, 2) adore dogs, care little for unfamiliar people, 3) adore members of both species and are thrilled to meet new ones and 4) adore neither dogs or

people, except maybe their owner. Needless to say, only categories 1 and 3 are good therapy prospects.”

Peaches loves and welcomes attention from strangers like no other creature I have ever seen. Recognizing this helped me shape her into the confident, successful dog she is now. When Peaches was a puppy, I could more likely move mountains than I could coax her across an unfamiliar threshold onto linoleum floor like you find in hospitals and schools. However, Peaches will follow new people anywhere. So my new project became finding opportunities to encourage her to follow strangers into places she normally wouldn't want to go. Now, she'll go anywhere. (For more detail on this, check out ["Kids, Books and Peaches ... Oh my!"](#)) Similarly, if you had asked me a year ago if I thought Peaches could handle running into a noisy industrial floor cleaner in a hallway, I would have assumed it was a rhetorical question. Now, during hospital visits, she proactively walks up to sniff it while it's running and then says "Hello" to the person operating it.

Meanwhile, Buster it turns out, while sharp as a tack with commands in any kind of environment, is not all that "affiliative." He loves people he is familiar with, but is fairly indifferent about everybody else, especially when compared to a good piece of cheese. And recognizing this is much harder than one might think. Because it's not that he is afraid of or doesn't like strangers, but rather that he just doesn't care about them. And that strikes me as one of the more non-therapeutic qualities a dog can possibly have. And because I didn't recognize this early on, I wasn't able to utilize appropriate opportunities to reshape that behavior.

## Looking Ahead

While I know that right now Buster may not make a great therapy dog, all that could change a few years down the road like McConnell goes on to point out in her article, when he matures and has had some more training. Or maybe not, and that's OK too. Because as our obedience and therapy dog trainer explained to us during our class orientation, the primary goal with any dog training should be to shape your dog into a happy, healthy and successful member of your family. Everything beyond that, including therapy dog work, is just icing on the cake. And to be honest, I'm having far more fun with Buster now goofing around with fun nosework and going on outdoor adventures than I ever did with the therapy work. And more importantly, so is he.



This notion of “born versus made” and therapy dog preparation has been on my mind a lot lately for two reasons. The first being the pressing need to reconsider Buster’s training and decide if both of us would be happier just letting Buster be goofy, non-affiliative Buster. The second reason is a growing concern I have that volunteer therapy dog work may be in danger of becoming “trendy,” possibly to the detriment of many dogs who would be much happier without it. Just recently, a facility near me had an incident with a therapy dog growling at a patient during a visit. An incident like that indicates that that dog’s handler clearly missed or ignored signs of her dog’s discomfort and is grounds for immediate dismissal from the program, as well as revocation of her therapy dog registration. There were earlier warning signs, and even direct advice from the program’s animal therapy consultant—but these were all ignored because of a personal desire to participate in the work, even at the expense of the dog and the program.

As an educator and a pit bull advocate, I love volunteering as a therapy dog team with my dog and feel incredibly fortunate to be a part of fabulous programs like our hospital’s “Pawsitive Comforts” therapy dog team and the [StubbyDog Superhero Squad](#). But my dog comes first. And if, at any moment, Peaches decides that she’s no longer comfortable with her visits, either temporarily or permanently, that’s it. We’re walking away. Because I know that therapy dog work is only one of an infinite number of ways that I can help advocate for dogs and pit bulls, and engage with my community. And there is nothing I will ever do to risk jeopardizing my most valuable asset: my relationship with my dog.



For the full text of Dr. Patricia McConnell’s blog post, see [Therapy Dogs – Born or Made?](#)

For more thoughtful discussion on the subject, read [“Animal Assisted Therapy,”](#) [“Animal Assisted Therapy Through the Ages”](#) and the [“Handbook on Animal-Assisted Therapy.”](#)

For more information about animal-assisted activities and animal-assisted therapy programs, along with common requirements for potential therapy animals, visit [Intermountain Therapy Animals](#), [Pet Partners](#) and [Therapy Dogs Incorporated](#).