

From an animal-shelter dog to a therapy dog

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Project „Tiere als Therapie“ – „Wiener Tierschutzverein“

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With this project we would like to show that a dog from an animal shelter, especially one which is known as “fighting dog”, can be encouraged and strengthened in his social behaviour. Thus his quality of life and his chance for adaptation are improved. After finishing their “therapy-dog training” the dogs and their owners are qualified for animal-assisted-visits. Especially working in prisons, where people live with a similar destiny as the shelter dogs, could show great effects. A good example from the USA is the “Green Chimneys” which indicate great success in working with children and teenager from difficult social situations.

10 “fighting-dogs” from an animal shelter, supported by “dog-godparents”, were chosen for this project. All dogs resided at the animal-shelter for several years. Nobody was interested in adopting one of them.

The costs for the whole 2-year training conduct €1000. The biggest part of the sum is funded by donations (individuals and institutions can “adopt” one team in training). The rest of the costs are financed by “Tiere als Therapie”.

The project started in summer of 2013 with preparation and organisation. In November 2013 the practical training began. Every two weeks, a dog-trainer worked with the teams (one dog with its “godparent”) focused on:

- Behaviour with humans
- Behaviour with other dogs
- Habituation to subsidiaries, wheelchairs, excessive noise etc.
- Reliable obedience

The “dog-godparents” were educated in:

- Basic principles of dog behaviour and learning systems
- How to understand and read dog body language
- Possible application of therapy-dogs

Of course they were supported in practical training and their further questions.

The project should last for 2 years. The first intermediate testing of all dogs was very successful. The dogs as well as their “godparents” showed enormous work enthusiasm right from the beginning. After a short time, it was possible to train without a muzzle and we rarely noticed problems in intraspecific contact. It was obvious that all dogs enjoyed the training with the humans. The “godparents” were glad about the great achievements of their protégés. Asked why they participate in this project they responded: “We want to give these dogs a reasonable task, we want to meet like-minded people and after this training these “fighting dogs” have a better chance for being adopted by a new family.”

The teams are on a good way. They get permanent support while their progress is examined regularly. From the starting-10 dogs, just 3 aren’t adopted by now. All others have found a new family for good.

With this project we expect a fundamental input for animal welfare. We want to stop the denigrate stigmatization of these “fighting-dog”-breeds. Because of the huge commitment of all people and the high quality training, great intermediate results were examined. This project can serve as a model for other animal shelters so all dogs can establish their great and valuable skills breed-independently.