

How Guide Dogs are trained

Guide Dogs Australia sources pups from a number of registered breeders throughout Australia. Labradors, Golden Retrievers and cross Labrador/Golden Retrievers are preferred owing to:

- Their willingness to learn and cope with intensive training to become Guide Dogs
- Height variation within the breeds proving useful in accommodating the varying heights of people with vision impairment
- Their responsiveness and general good temperament
- Their ease of grooming
- Their lack of major health problems
- A proven history of success with these breeds

All dogs are assessed for temperament and must have a high willingness to please the user, as well as a natural responsiveness.

A combination of careful matching and training of a person and the Guide Dog results in a successful Guide Dog Team. Perhaps one of the most important aspects of the team however, is a positive bond between the person and the Guide Dog. This bond is fostered during the four to five week training period during which the person with vision impairment learns to communicate effectively with their new dog: giving it commands, directions and hand signals at critical moments, and learning correct voice intonation, timing of praise and corrections. It is stressed that a positive, supportive approach will increase the dog's willingness to work that is, obviously, beneficial to both the person and the Guide Dog.

A prospective Guide Dog must go through various stages – a process that enables a fully trained Guide Dog to follow instructions given by the person relying on it for independent mobility.

1. Puppy Raising

Puppy Raising is a foster program that lasts approximately 12 to 14 months for pups that may, one day, be Guide Dogs. They learn basic obedience and social skills during this period.

Puppy Raisers are volunteer families or individuals who provide a caring environment for the pups. This is a big commitment, especially seeing as though someone needs to be home for most of the day to look after the pups.

They are responsible for feeding the pups a well balanced diet, grooming them daily and making sure they go to the vet when required.

Puppy Raisers also need to take the pups on daily walks to keep them fit and healthy and increase their social skills. The pups learn to feel comfortable in a wide range of environments with lots of different sights, sounds and smells.

The Puppy Raiser and the pup in their care regularly visit the Guide Dogs Centre at Glossodia. This allows the Puppy Raiser an opportunity to have face-to-face contact with the training staff. Similarly, staff of Guide Dogs visit the Puppy Raiser in their home to provide ongoing support.

2. Guide Dog Training

After approximately 12 to 14 months, the dogs are returned to the Guide Dogs Centre for an assessment period of around 2 weeks to see if they are suitable for Guide Dog training.

Each dog undertakes a number of walks with a Guide Dog Instructor who checks its overall character and temperament. The Instructors assess the dog's willingness to work and levels of initiative and concentration. The dogs are also monitored for any signs of nervousness, aggressiveness, anxiety or distraction by other animals.

Not all dogs are suitable to becoming Guide Dogs - some are better suited to companion work in our Pets As Therapy (PAT) program.

Those that are suited to Guide Dog training undergo a five month intensive program. By the time the dogs complete the final stage of training, they should be confident doing the following:

- Walking in a straight line without sniffing
- Walking on the left-hand side slightly ahead of the trainer
- Stopping at all curbs
- Waiting for a command before crossing roads
- Stopping at the start of each flight of stairs
- Avoiding head height obstacles
- Avoiding spaces too narrow for a person and a dog
- Boarding and travelling on all forms of public transport
- Taking the trainer to the lift
- Learning many basic commands
- Laying quietly in restaurants or at work
- Intelligently disobeying commands that may lead the handler into danger

3. Training the Guide Dog Team

Instructors assess and identify a suitable dog for each person applying for a Guide Dog. For example, lifestyle is an important consideration. A very active person living and working in the city needs a dog that handles stress and likes to work. This Guide Dog should however be equally content to wait patiently for many hours while the person is in the office.

At the beginning of the training the client is introduced to their Guide Dog. This meeting and the next four to five weeks of training are critical to the success of the team. The person learns how to work with the dog. This includes giving commands to the dog when they're working. They also learn how to look after the dog, including diet, grooming, health checks, obedience, and how to orientate in the local environment.

The person and his or her Guide Dog can visit all sorts of places together and rely on each other to get around safely. As the dog becomes more confident, the tasks get more challenging. All this is a progression of careful teaching. Each command has to be taught and understood.

The partnership between a Guide Dog and his or her handler is not only a great example of an animal working with a human, but a rewarding success for all involved. The dog has an interesting life, in a job that rewards intelligence and intuition - a job that dogs show they enjoy.

All services, including mobility aids are provided free of charge. Anyone can make a referral.

For more information on available services call 1800 804 805 or visit guidedogsaustralia.com.au