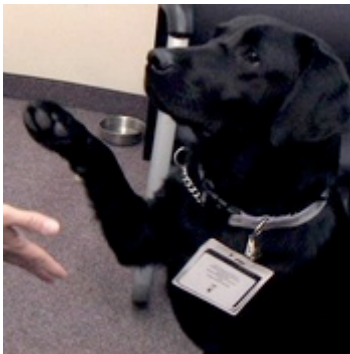




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Peer Pressure Now a Good Thing with Dogs in School

By Brian Stillman



Two black labs are learning to become therapy dogs at Brooklyn's Block Institute, a school and health care facility serving developmentally challenged children and adults.

NEW YORK -- It's 9 o'clock on a sunny Monday morning in September, and, having just discharged their young passengers, school buses are pulling away from Brooklyn's Block Institute.

A silver SUV glides by and then backs into a nearby parking space.

Gina Maranga, the school's program director, gets out, adjusts her green sweater, grabs her bag, and then opens the door for her passenger. But before he can hop down, she clips a leash to his collar. It's a good thing, because as soon as his back paws hit the pavement,

the frisky black labrador tries to lunge past Maranga's car and into the thick foliage of an abutting park.

"Hey," she says, giving a little tug. The dog quickly steps to her heel and the two cross the parking lot and enter the Institute. Just another Monday morning for Maranga and the school's latest hire, a dog named Chester.

Chester is one of two labs being trained for Block Institute's new pet assisted therapy program. Located next door to Drier-Offerman Park, and within sight of Coney Island's Parachute Drop, the Institute provides education and care for both children and adults with developmental disabilities, including autism, ADD, ADHD, and other emotional, psychological, and physical conditions.

Administrators hope that Chester, along with his liter-mate Chuckie, can provide a kind of passive therapy for students and patients.

"Everyone loves dogs," said the Institute's executive director, Scott Barkin, PhD.

Dressed in a crisp, dark suit with a bright, robin's-egg blue tie, he's sitting in his office, surrounded by rangy potted plants, photos of his family, and framed degrees. His eyes light up behind a pair of rectangular glasses as he glances down at Chuckie, who's lying at his feet and industriously gnawing on a toy bone.

"People relax around them," he continued, explaining that animals can fill a variety of roles within a classroom setting. "The dog could be a strategy for trying to accomplish a goal; a child who has anxiety issues about reading aloud might be more encouraged. The dog is a stimulus to relax. Instead of making eye contact with the teacher, make eye contact with the dog. They're less threatening."

Maranga agreed.

"The dogs will help us bring the children out, and help them relate to other people. Having a dog is like an icebreaker. It elicits a spontaneous response."

But Chester and Chuckie are still students themselves. Before they're allowed to work -- or even interact -- with children, they need to become certified as therapy dogs. In charge of their training is Lea Colon, a veteran dog trainer who began her career more than two decades ago working with police dogs.

She's spent the last two weeks helping her two charges become acclimated to the often chaotic environment of a school, which can include crowds of noisy children, lunch-time aromas, and ringing bells.

But Block Institute poses less common challenges as well, like being bumped by wheel chairs, or distracted by strange smells from rolling medicine carts. Add to this a student body whose members sometimes can't control emotional or physical reactions, or might

not be able to express themselves in ways the dogs recognize, and suddenly, Block Institute becomes an increasingly difficult maze for dogs to navigate.

"Service dogs need to be happy, sound, and secure," says Colon (pronounced like "cologn"). "They need to have control, but at the same time, they need to be able to meet-and-greet with other people, and they need to feel comfortable being petted and handled."

Colon and Chester are in an unoccupied classroom, surrounded by micro-sized furniture designed for the three to 5-year-olds who normally meet here. The trainer grabs a light, plastic chair and gently tosses it in front of Chester while his head is facing away. It makes a loud clattering sound; the dog starts, but doesn't bolt. His tail never stops wagging, and he pokes the chair with his nose.

"They have to withstand noises, chairs may fall," says Colon. "It's okay if they're surprised, that's a natural reaction. But see, he's still happy -- we don't want him to be afraid of it."

She reaches down and claps Chester on the side. "Good dog!"

Block Institute received Chester and Chuckie from a group called Leader Dogs For the Blind. Founded in 1939, the group breeds and trains guide dogs, and then pairs them with their new owners. Unfortunately, the two 14-month-old labs were born with a defective gene that can lead to exhaustion induced collapse syndrome, a disqualifier for seeing eye dogs. However, many of the animal's innate traits, bred over generations, make them trainable as therapy dogs.

Chester, for instance, "loves when people are petting him," said Maranga, who takes him home with her during the evenings and weekends. "He follows his commands really well. He's kind of unflappable. Apart from the puppy exuberance that comes through sometimes, he's really a calm dog that loves being around people."

Chuckie, who's a bit larger and more stoic than his brother, also has the potential to become an excellent therapy dog. "He has a warm personality, but he's not exuberant," explained Barkin, who currently houses Chuckie. "He's phenomenally obedient and has increasingly become more confident in an environment with a lot of noise, a lot of movement, and a lot of people."

That's encouraging, he added, because there's no road map for the type of program Block Institute is building. While therapy pets have often visited schools and hospitals, this is one of the only programs that have resident animals five days a week, 12 months a year.

"Not only have we had to train the dogs," he said, "but we've also had to train the staff and get them used to seeing Chuckie and Chester."

Colon guesses that the dogs have another two weeks or so before they're ready for certification. After that, they'll be paired with handlers who will take them from class to class to meet the kids.

Until then, these furry staff-in-training enjoy going for walks, hanging out in the offices, and generally reveling in the attention they get as the cutest members of the Block Institute team.

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