

FAQ: Who are the primary players in the S.T.A.R. Program?

S.T.A.R. Teams

All S.T.A.R. teams are volunteer dog/handler pairs recruited from the Portland Metro area's vibrant dog community. They are ably assisted by people without dogs who "share the vision".

S.T.A.R. Dogs

- Applicant dogs must have earned their AKC Canine Good Citizen (CGC) certificate, but they DO NOT need prior registration with another animal therapy organization. Incoming dogs (with their human) will go through multi-stage, program-specific training and testing, and will serve a monitored apprenticeship in the field. Please visit our Web site for the full training plan.
- Applicant dogs must be rock-solid around children, and interact with them without stress.
- Applicant dogs must be currently licensed in their county of residence, and must be current on any vaccinations specifically required for licensing.
- Bonus points if the dog has expressions/postures/tail activity that children can easily spot and interpret.
- Bonus points for dogs who have participated in canine sports – the more the better!
- What DON'T we screen for?
 - Diet. We do not work with a medically fragile population.
 - Size, breed, age, sex, physical scars/handicaps – though certain characteristics may make the dog unsuitable/problematic for certain clients. Examples:
 - Unneutered male with visible genitalia would not be matched with sexually abused children.
 - A dog with physical deformities/scars that suggest they are the result of violence would not be matched with children who have been physically abused.
- Apprentice S.T.A.R. dogs (those still in training) :
 - MUST thoroughly understand what the clicker means.
 - MUST have an acceptable "polite greeting" for humans, and be able to maintain self-control around other dogs.
 - MUST be able to take treats gently.
- Approved S.T.A.R. dogs (those who have completed training, passed their basic proficiency test, and are authorized to work independently with our clients):
 - MUST have a reliable sit and/or down, under both verbal and hand signals.
 - MUST have a reliable emergency recall signal.
 - MUST have at least one behavior that can be the starting point for fun variants as designed by the kids. Examples that have been useful for existing teams:
 - Targeting, with nose, paw or whole body – creating a "target stick" out of some random object within 3 clicks is an excellent visual for kids;
 - "Pick this up and put it there" becomes basketball, put the socks in the basket, the shoes in the shoebox, the litter in the wastebasket, etc.
 - "Push this with your nose" becomes a game of soccer, bowling, etc.
 - "Pat this with your paw" becomes playing a tiny piano, or turning a light off and on
- We also welcome "guest appearances" from dogs who have passed their Canine Good Citizen (CGC) test. This allows us to reinforce messages about reading canine body language with examples from multiple breeds and sizes.

S.T.A.R. Humans

Our humans fall into several categories, depending on their level of involvement in the therapy sessions/classes. To ensure continuity for the young clients, there will be one primary S.T.A.R. handler for each assignment. This primary handler may bring in additional contributors and assistants as needed.

Baseline requirements for ALL participants associated with S.T.A.R.:

- Must. Like. Kids. Full stop.
- Must use **ONLY** positive training methods during S.T.A.R. sessions.
- Must absolutely forgo behavior and language associated with violence or punishment during visits.
- Must be sensitive to the emotional and mental state of the young people they meet, carefully following the lead of the teacher/counselor/therapist.
- Must pass the criminal background check required in most of the facilities we will be visiting.
- Must have a good sense of humor!

Primary S.T.A.R. Handler

This is the key S.T.A.R. human in a therapy relationship. All S.T.A.R. handlers will be screened, and will be asked to attend orientation activities.

- This level handler must
 - Be comfortable having children interact with their dog, and must be calmly adept at making sure that interactions remain safe and controlled for all parties.
 - Be willing to spend time training their dog outside of their therapy commitments. **This is not a minor requirement.**
- It is understood that most trainers have a deep tool kit of training methods, but the primary trainer must commit to using the S.T.A.R. (See, Tag And Reward) model during therapy sessions.
- As the S.T.A.R. curriculum develops, this person will have an increasing fund of resources and ideas as they enter a therapy relationship – but the truth of the matter is that each session will be highly dependent on circumstances that are fluid and unpredictable, and the handler must be ready to creatively adapt on the fly. Fortunately, this is something clicker-trainers already practice.

Guest Handlers

At the invitation of the primary S.T.A.R. handler, other handlers – even those unfamiliar with clicker-training – may make carefully-controlled visits to demonstrate some of the fascinating range of canine skills. These handlers should be able to field questions from the youngsters, and willing to comply with the baseline requirements above. They are not expected to have their dogs physically interact with the kids, however. Those dogs who have achieved their CGC title may interact at their handlers' discretion.

Assistants and Program Evaluators

These are the "extra hands" that can make a session move more smoothly. We had extraordinary luck in recruiting assistants for the pilots! The president of the Animal Aid Board of Directors assisted at Harkins House, and four energetic and intelligent seniors from LEP High assisted at McKay Elementary. Since 2013 we have been assisted by Seniors at Pacific University. Future assistants, in addition to meeting the baseline requirements above, will attend an orientation session so that they are brought up-to-speed on the theory behind S.T.A.R. and how it works.

Because The Little Dog Laughed Animal-Assisted Therapy is a 501(c)(3) charity, being an assistant is a possible avenue for high school students to meet community service requirements.

Board of Directors

Our goal is to have a volunteer Board that includes representatives from the dog training world, humane education, counseling, domestic violence advocacy, and elementary education. Our Board may also be "boots on the ground" participants, but their primary contribution is bringing personal specialties to bear on defining and refining the program.