



# Guidelines to Self-Training Approaches

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## Contents

Introduction.....	1
Considerations about Approaches.....	1
Suggested Training Approaches .....	8
Example Timeline of Preparing for Atlas’ Program.....	16
Appendix A: Puppy and Dog Reference List.....	20
Appendix B: Socialization Checklist .....	21

## Introduction

The purpose of this document is to help you to determine the best approach to prepare to apply for our team certification program. This document will help you consider factors such as your experience and ability to train your dog yourself, your support network, your financial options, your dog’s suitability, and the skills you need your dog to perform. Based on those factors, it then suggests possible approaches you might follow as you prepare to apply to our program. No approach is wrong or right as long as it will be successful for you and your dog. Finally, this document also provides a sample timeline and types of training to do with your dog in preparation for our program. Our FAQs and Team Certification Program document are other great sources of information to help you decide if owner-based training, through Atlas, is the best solution for you. Also, please see our Team Readiness Assessment document for the assessment you and your dog will be expected to pass in order to begin our Team Facilitator process; it will be a useful guide as you plan your training approach. Remember, even if you start with one approach, it may be appropriate to change midstream to another – you might find you need more support or less support as you prepare for our program.

## Considerations about Approaches

Weigh your answers to each of these questions with consideration of the full team – handler, client, and dog – in mind. While one answer may point to you doing preparatory training all on your own, another answer may point to an approach with more support from a private trainer. Your answers may point you to start with a different dog for training than you had planned. They might even point you to reconsider whether owner-based training, and our program, will be successful for you and your dog. We are always happy to answer any questions about what might be best for you and your dog. Simply contact [info@atlasdog.org](mailto:info@atlasdog.org).



<b>Dog Training Experience: How much dog training experience does the primary handler have?</b>		
<b>Significant</b>	You have had dogs around you most of your life and have trained them to do various obedience, agility, or other skills. The client, if other than the handler, is comfortable with dogs.	
<b>Moderate</b>	You have experience training several different skills, from introduction to refinement with at least one dog. The client, if other than the handler, has had positive experiences with dogs.	
<b>Minimal/None</b>	This is your first dog as an adult or the first dog you have been the primary trainer for. If the client has no dog experiences or negative prior dog experiences, minimal/none is also typically the correct assessment even if the handler has more significant experience.	
<b>Puppy Experience: How much experience does the primary handler have in raising puppies?</b>		
<b>Significant</b>	You were the primary person responsible for raising two or more puppies from young puppy (~ 8-10 weeks) to adulthood (>2 years), and the dogs are well-socialized and mannered. The client, if other than the handler, is comfortable with puppies including their teething and activity level.	
<b>Moderate</b>	You have been in a household with puppies being raised and took an active role in house training, socialization, and manners training. The client, if other than the handler, is comfortable with puppies including their teething and activity level.	
<b>Minimal/None</b>	This is your first puppy as an adult or the first puppy you are the primary caretaker for. If the client has no dog experience, and puppy activity levels and needs will be stressful for them, this is also typically the correct assessment even if the handler has more significant experience.	



Support Available: How much support do you have?		
<b>Significant</b>	You have multiple people in your household, or readily available, to help with exercising, training, and caring for the dog. If client is not able to train or handle the dog on their own, an alternate handler is the one primarily doing the training and lives with the client.	
<b>Moderate</b>	You have at least one other person in your household, or readily available, to help with exercising, training, and caring for the dog.	
<b>Minimal/None</b>	You live alone with your dog or will be the only one assisting in the care and training of your dog.	
Support Needed: How much support are you likely to need?		
<b>Significant</b>	Your disability will make being the primary trainer of the dog unreasonable, and there is not a secondary handler who will be training the dog. You do not have a consistent way to transport yourself and the dog to various training environments, or you are unable to work with your dog in those environments on your own. <b>Please be aware, if you answered “significant” to this question, owner-based training may not be right for you.</b>	
<b>Moderate</b>	Your disability might make some aspects of caring and training for your dog a bit more difficult, but you are ready to work through the challenges, and you have a realistic understanding of the training involved. Your disability does not prevent you from practicing the specialized skills you need your dog to do, or there is another handler who will help with training, and you have the means to transport yourself and your dog to various training environments.	
<b>Minimal/None</b>	Your disability does not impact your ability to care for, exercise, or socialize the dog in any significant way.	



<b>Time Available: How much time can you commit to working with your dog?</b>		
<b>Significant</b>	You have significant time (several hours) each day to be with the dog and actively work with them.	
<b>Moderate</b>	You have time to train your dog for at least 30 minutes each day, as well as time to exercise and socialize them each day.	
<b>Minimal</b>	You think you can commit time to daily care and exercise of the dog, but do not have time to consistently train them each day. <b>Please be aware, if you answered “minimal” to this question, owner-based training may not be right for you.</b>	
<b>Money Available: How much money can you spend?</b>		
<b>Significant</b>	You have personal resources or access to funds that would provide \$10,000-\$20,000 over the course of the training, if needed. You can readily provide day-to-day, as well as emergency care, for your dog.	
<b>Moderate</b>	You have personal resources or access to funds that would provide approximately \$3,000-\$7,000 over the course of the training, if needed. You can readily provide day-to-day, as well as emergency care, for your dog.	
<b>Minimal</b>	You have funds to care for your dog and their vet bills, but no more than \$1000-\$2000 available to pay for training. <b>Please note, while Atlas tries to offer scholarships, our base certification cost is \$700 for six months of support and initial certification. A service dog is not the right solution for you if you are not confident you can meet a dog’s day-to-day and emergency medical needs.</b>	



Skill Complexity: How complex are the disability skills you want the dog to perform?		
<b>Significant</b>	You need the dog to perform highly advanced and discriminating tasks such as medical alert involving scent detection for diabetes or allergen alert; complex alerting scenarios to bring help; complex autism support; or you have significant PTSD support needs. <b>Please be aware, if you answered “significant” to this question, you will likely need the support of a private trainer in addition to your Atlas facilitator. If you also answered “significant” in the Support Needed section, then owner-based training may not be the best model for you.</b>	
<b>Moderate</b>	You need the dog to perform moderately complex skills related to mobility, medical response, milder PTSD, or moderate anxiety/psychiatric support, or autism assistance. The skills would require multiple steps of refinement such as opening and closing doors, alerting the client if a person walks near them, reminding the client it is time to take medicine, bracing and significant balance support, or alerting a handler if a child left the area.	
<b>Minimal</b>	You need the dog to perform fairly simple skills that might include retrieval, hearing alerts, milder anxiety/psychiatric support, or simpler medical assistance. The skills would not require as much refinement such as applying physical pressure, waking from nightmares, alerting to alarms and sounds, interrupting repetitive behavior, retrieving named items, or simpler proprioception assistance.	



Dog's Ability: How experienced is the dog already?		
<b>Significant</b>	Dog has a solid background from early puppy socialization through adolescent/adult training. They have been trained primarily with positive reinforcement methods and enjoy training. Dog could readily pass a Canine Good Citizen test. They have a fair amount of public exposure and are comfortable and confident in many environments. They may already be introduced to some of the disability skills.	
<b>Moderate</b>	Dog has a good background in early puppy socialization and at least basic manners training. They walk nicely on a leash, come readily when called, can stay or wait in position and know a handful of cues such as down, sit, or shake. They have a fair amount of public exposure in dog-friendly spaces and are comfortable in most environments. <b>Please be aware, if you answered "moderate," you may need to do some refresher or additional training with the dog on your own or with the support of a private or group trainer prior to being able to pass the Atlas Team Assessment Skills section.</b>	
<b>Minimal</b>	Dog has little training background or little exposure to public and varied environments. They have some experience walking on leash but pull frequently. They may come when called some of the time, but not consistently. They may be responsive to basic cues at home but be extremely distracted in public environments. <b>Please be aware, if you answered "minimal," your dog will not be able to pass the Atlas Team Assessment Skills section. You may need to work with a private or group trainer prior to starting our program. If the dog did not have suitable early socialization, they may not be suitable for work as a service dog.</b>	



Dog's Behavior Issues: Does the dog have any behavioral or temperament issues that need resolving?		
<p><b>Significant</b></p>	<p>Dog regularly reacts to situations in ways that would be unsafe for the handler, the general public, or the dog. Dog regularly reacts in ways that are not consistent with behavior expected of service dogs. Examples include but are not limited to: strong aggressive or fearful reactions, unruly and unmanageable excitement, excessive vocalization, significant resource guarding of people or objects, strong adverse reaction to body handling, or destruction of owner's or other's property. <b>Please be aware, if you answered "significant," the dog may not have the temperament suitable for service work. Private training may resolve some items, but it is unlikely that the dog will be reliable in public settings.</b></p>	
<p><b>Moderate</b></p>	<p>Dog does not react in ways that are unsafe for the handler, the general public or, the dog. They do frequently react in ways that are not consistent with behavior expected of service dogs. Examples include but are not limited to: unruly and unmanageable excitement during greetings, excessive distraction when other dogs or items of interest are nearby, clear evidence of discomfort or stress in settings typical of where the team will work, minor struggles with specific areas of body handling, minor tendencies to resource guard from dogs but not people, or frequent nervous or excited vocalization. <b>Please be aware, if you answered "moderate," support of a private trainer may be necessary before you enter our program, or in parallel to your work with one of our facilitators.</b></p>	
<p><b>Minimal</b></p>	<p>Dog's reactions to people, places, and other animals are all friendly, calm, and meet expectations for how service dogs should behave in public. Dog is confident and relaxed in settings they will be working. Dog may have small areas where they need work on focus around distractions or need exposure to build confidence, but no significant issues are present.</p>	



## Interpreting your Answers

The above answers should help you weigh whether self-training through Atlas' program is a good fit for you. The images below will help you visualize how these questions interplay. The items should be considered together, not individually. It is the picture these factors form, when examined together, that will help you to be realistic about choosing a good approach.



During your initial interview with Atlas, we will discuss these factors with you and help you decide if our program is the right fit. We want you to be successful, and we will help you reach your goals to the best of our ability, even if that means directing you to another program or approach. The following section goes into more detail of possible approaches based on your answers to the above questions.

Personal preference also plays a strong role in the approach you take. Even if you have experience training dogs, you may prefer the personal or more private experience of having a private trainer working 1:1 with you to get you ready for our program. You may be someone who benefits from external structure. In contrast, you may be someone who really doesn't do well with external structure and wants to form your own plan. Or, the collaboration you might have with others doing group training may be of benefit to you. No approach is right or wrong as long as you are honest about your own needs and capabilities as well as your dog's needs and capabilities.

## **Suggested Training Approaches**

### Starting from a puppy

First off, expect that you have about two years of work ahead of you before your puppy will be ready to certify, and possibly longer depending on the dog or the skills needed. Some dogs mature more slowly, some skills are



more complex, and some skills require the dog be fully physically developed before training them.

Raising a good puppy for service work is a lot like raising any good puppy. You want the puppy to have many good experiences with as many people, places, and things as possible. We specifically call out good experiences vs. the more common terms of socialization and exposure, as not all socialization or exposure is equal. We want a history of positive experiences. This allows the dog to build confidence, curiosity, and resilience. For dogs going into service work, it's especially important that they get as many early (8-12 weeks of age) positive experiences as possible. Remember also that socialization and exposure doesn't stop at that age. You need to continue building your dog's history of positive experiences.

Training, socializing, and caring for a puppy is a daily requirement. Puppies are a big commitment, but you have the advantage of knowing where the dog has come from, and you can mold their experiences yourself to avoid creating problem behaviors that need to be fixed later in their life.

Your puppy will need to develop a good foundation of manners, learn impulse control, and be extremely well-socialized. They need to be trained with patience, starting with the basics and gradually building on those skills, in order to be trained to the point they can pass our Team Readiness Assessment.

### **Self-training on your own**

Self-training on your own is not applicable for puppies. Group puppy socialization and play classes are critical for a puppy's development. Even if you do the rest of their training on your own, do not skip puppy socialization classes.

### **Self-training on your own with Teams Set In Motion™**

Teams Set in Motion is an in-depth online self-paced dog training program that is open to owners of any dog. Participants in the program learn how to train their future service dogs on the foundation skills they need to learn before entering our Client Certification Program as well as to give any dog owner the knowledge they need to keep their dog healthy, happy, and well-adjusted. Participants in this course learn:

- Positive training methods
- Mechanics
- Foundation skills benefiting any dog
- How to train basic obedience skills
- How to build your dog's confidence, engagement, and resilience
- How to build a better relationship with your dog
- Husbandry skills – caring for nails, grooming
- The building blocks needed for service work and for any well-behaved, well-trained dog (this is not a service dog course)
- Some tricks or fun behaviors
- Body Awareness

The program includes a private Facebook group and bi-monthly Zoom office hours for additional support.

More information is available [here](#).



### **Self-training on your own with the support of group training**

Self-training on your own, with the support of group training, is best for people who answered as follows on the above survey:

- Dog Training Experience, Puppy Experience, and Time Available: significant
- Support Available: moderate or significant
- Money Available: significant, moderate, or minimal
- Support Needed and Skill Complexity: minimal

You have raised many confident and social dogs and given the goal behaviors needed to pass our Team Assessment, you can get yourself there with minimal outside support. Group classes for puppy socialization, and then possibly basic obedience classes, will help you get on a good training plan that you can continue yourself. The support of a private trainer to help with puppy selection is also strongly recommended. A model that could be successful would be:

- Private trainer to help select puppy
- Group classes for puppy socialization
- Work on your own on basic and advanced obedience and introducing foundational skills that are precursors to actual disability task training
- When the dog is 14 months old, or whenever after that you are ready to pass our Team Assessment, you start working with Atlas to train disability skills and do public access training.

### **Mix of group and private training**

A mix of group and private training is best for people who answered as follows on the above survey:

- Dog Training Experience, Puppy Experience, and Time Available: moderate
- Support Available: moderate or minimal
- Money Available: significant or moderate
- Support Needed and Skill Complexity: minimal or moderate

You have some experience raising and training dogs. If you are given high-level guidance and can fit in the necessary time you are confident you can teach most obedience skills and do socialization. However, your needs for support as well as disability skills are a bit greater. A model that could be successful would be:

Private trainer to help select a puppy and to get you started

Group classes for puppy socialization, basic and advanced obedience. We recommend you find a good facility to work with and form a relationship with them, going through a series of classes. Let them know your ultimate goals.

Private trainer to work on more advanced disability skills, possibly with boarded training as necessary

At 14 months old, or whenever your dog is ready after that to pass our Team Assessment, you start working with



Atlas to refine the disability skills in more environments, introduce any remaining disability skills, and refine your public access training. Depending on the complexity of the disability skills and your preference, your private trainer may stay involved in parallel while you work with Atlas.

### **Primarily private training**

Primarily private training is best for people who answered as follows on the above survey:

- Dog Training Experience, Puppy Experience: moderate or minimal
- Support Available: moderate or minimal
- Money Available: significant or moderate
- Support Needed and Time Available: moderate
- Skill Complexity: moderate or significant

You may or may not have much experience training dogs, and it is likely that you don't have experience being the primary caretaker of a puppy. You may not be comfortable managing the training plan and how to get from puppy level to the advanced level needed to pass our Team Assessment. You might want the comfort of training in your own home or struggle with transportation. Your disability skill needs might be more complex. A model that could be successful would be:

- Private trainer to help select puppy and get you started, using more regular sessions at first, such as weekly.
- Private training continued at a cadence that works with your dog's maturity by introducing foundation and then more advanced obedience skills. Typically shifting to every other week, or every three weeks as you and the dog become familiar with training. You just need to practice or to wait for the dog to mature. Don't spread the session out too far to ensure that you stay engaged and on track.
- Private training continued to work on more advanced disability skills, possibly with boarded training
- At 14 months old, or whenever your dog is ready after that to pass our Team Assessment, you start working with Atlas to refine the disability skills in more environments, introduce any remaining disability skills, and refine your public access training. Depending on the complexity of the disability skills, and your preference, it is likely that you will want your private trainer to stay involved in parallel while you work with Atlas.

### **Atlas support through Assistance Dogs Set In Motion™**

Assistance Dogs Set in Motion provides an option that may enable purchase and training of a puppy suitable for service work at a much lower cost than purchasing a dog directly from a trainer.

Atlas partners with qualified, ethical breeders and our own Team Facilitator Puppy Raisers and trainers to find and start puppies and dogs for people with disabilities who want and qualify for a service dog.

#### How it Works

1. **Puppy Selection:** Atlas works with ethical and qualified breeders and rescues to select a starting candidate, typically a pup of about 8-10 weeks of age.



2. **Team Facilitator Puppy Raiser:** A Team Facilitator Puppy Raiser will raise the puppy until approximately one year of age.
  - While the dog is in training with the facilitator (typically for 8-10 months), the client is in the loop and also being coached and learning about training, service dogs, and being prepped for their dog's arrival.
  - Two months prior to receiving the puppy, the client starts Atlas' Teams Set in Motion online course and continue in it until they are ready to join Atlas' Client Certification Program. They are learning in parallel with their dog!
3. **Transition Training:** Approximately one month prior to receiving the puppy, the client will start transfer training with the Team Facilitator Puppy Raiser to prepare for when the puppy is approximately 12 months old and goes to live with them.

During the two months between when the client takes the puppy home and when they start the Client Certification Program, the client will have support from the Puppy Raiser and Team Facilitator transition coordinator along with a two-month training plan, logs, and video assignments to complete.
4. **Team Facilitator Training:** When the dog is one year old, and the client is ready, the dog will be transferred back with continuous support from Atlas. When ready, and the dog is at least 14 months old, they begin Atlas' Team Certification Program to solidify their dog's training and get the ongoing support they need. Once the client enters the Client Certification Program, they will work with a Team Facilitator. The facilitator works closely with the client to develop a specialized training plan so that the dog gets all the foundation skills as well as any specialized skills their person will need.
5. **Public Access Test and Certification:** When the dog is at least 20 months old and the Team Facilitator determines that the team is ready, they take the Public Access Test. Upon passing the test the team is certified.

#### Starting from an adolescent or slightly trained dog

Many of the people who come to Atlas fall into this area. You have a dog who has had puppy classes and basic training earlier, and then it was either maintained or not. You may have recently adopted your dog as a juvenile or adult. They may have a few little behavior quirks to clean up like jumping at greetings or counter surfing, and they may need to have their confidence and experience built in a few key stressful environments, but they don't have any significant behavior or temperament issues. They simply need more training. These are dogs who typically can't pass the more distracted/advanced skills area of Atlas' Team Assessment test but can do well on the rest. They might be close and just need a little fine tuning, or they might need a lot more foundation training. There are several ways to prepare for our program, depending on how you answered our assessment above.

The analysis we go through to determine what to recommend for the adolescent dog, or partially trained dog, is similar to that for a puppy.

#### Self-training on your own

- Dog Training Experience and Time Available: significant
- Support Available: moderate or significant
- Money Available: significant, moderate, or minimal



- Support Needed and Skill Complexity: minimal
- Dog's Ability: moderate or minimal
- Dog's Behavior issues: minimal

Starting with an adolescent is not as involved as starting with a puppy unless they have behavior challenges that need to be overcome. Self-training without external support is not recommended for cases where your dog has behavioral challenges. Review our Team Assessment form to understand what skills you will need to be able to pass, as a team, in order to enter the Atlas program. If you feel you and your dog can get there on your own, then training on your own is a reasonable approach for you. Many people find value from the support and structure of at least group classes, so even if you are experienced in dog training, do consider that option.

#### **Self-training on your own with the support of group training**

- Dog Training Experience and Time Available: moderate
- Support Available: moderate or significant
- Money Available: significant, moderate or minimal
- Support Needed and Skill Complexity: minimal
- Dog's Ability: moderate or minimal
- Dog's Behavior Issues: moderate or minimal
- You have experience raising and training dogs, are confident with how to teach and refine most obedience skills in distracting settings and can commit to the time necessary to train your dog. You feel you would benefit from the consistency of a regular group class. Your dog might have some mild behavioral challenges that can be met in group classes focused on topics such as impulse control or mild reactivity.

In most cases, the client purchases and owns the puppy from the start. The client pays costs for raising and training the puppy.

#### **Mix of group and private training**

- Dog Training Experience and Time Available: moderate
- Support Available: moderate
- Money Available: significant or moderate
- Support Needed and Skill Complexity: minimal, moderate, or significant
- Dog's Ability: moderate or minimal
- Dog's Behavior issues: moderate or minimal

You lived with dogs and have been a part of training and raising them, but you weren't necessarily the primary caretaker. You can handle the basic obedience training on your own or with the support of group classes. Your dog may need more advanced behavioral help from a private trainer. You may have more complex disability skill needs and would benefit from a private trainer. A model that is often successful:

6. Work with group classes to refresh/polish your dog's ability in obedience and manner areas



- Work with a private trainer in parallel or after group classes to address behavioral issues
- Work with a private service dog trainer (may or may not be same private trainer as one for behavioral) to introduce more complex disability skills. Boarded training is something to consider if you have little support, the skills you need are more complex, or you have a need for greater support.

### **Primarily private training**

- Dog Training Experience and Time Available: moderate or minimal
- Support Available: moderate
- Money Available: significant
- Support Needed and Skill Complexity: moderate, or significant
- Dog's Ability: moderate or minimal
- Dog's Behavior issues: significant, moderate, or minimal

There are many reasons you may choose to partner with a private trainer for the duration of your training. It may be that you don't have much experience raising dogs. It may be that you are familiar with pet dogs, but not raising service dogs, and you want to ensure the time and money you invest is well-spent. It might be that you prefer working with someone 1:1 or in the privacy of your home. Your dog may have more significant behavioral challenges, your needs may be more significant, or your support may be minimal. When working with a private trainer, you will often want some sessions with the trainer coaching you and your dog, and some sessions where they board your dog and work daily on more advanced skills. Please be aware, even with the support of a private trainer, unless they are doing an extended board and train with your dog, if you answered "significant" to skills needed and support needed and "minimal" to support available, you are not likely to succeed in an owner-trained model. Please also be aware if you answered "significant" to behavioral issues for the dog, they are likely to not be a good candidate for a service dog.

### **Starting with an already well-trained dog**

You may have already started working with your dog when they were a puppy or adolescent, and you have multiple years of experience working together and training. Alternatively, you may have adopted a dog recently or at a younger age. They may have come to you with a solid training background, or you may have worked with them to develop their skills. In the context of service dog training, a "well-trained" dog is also one without any significant behavioral or temperament issues. They are confident dogs, well-socialized, resilient, and well-adjusted; they adapt well to many different environments. They are comfortable with different types of people (adults, men, women, kids), animals, and situations. In short, your dog can blaze through our Team Assessment or might just need to do a bit of touch up, with the support of your Atlas Team Facilitator, in more distracting environments.

The main factor that determines the level of support needed in this case is the complexity of the disability skills and the individual's ability and desire to be part of the training. Group training is not likely to meet your needs at this point, as the support you would need is more specialized. The question then becomes whether you would need to get a private service dog trainer involved to help or if Atlas' model will meet everything you need on its own.



### **Completing training on your own with Atlas**

Completing training on your own with Atlas is best for people who answered as follows on the above survey:

- Dog Training Experience: moderate or significant
- Support Available and Time Available: moderate or significant
- Support Needed: moderate or minimal
- Skill Complexity: moderate or minimal

You are ready to move forward with Atlas and work with your Team Facilitator to the point you are ready for certification.

### **Private Training in parallel with Atlas**

Best for people who answered as follows on the above survey:

- Dog Training Experience: minimal
- Support Available and Time Available: moderate
- Support Needed: moderate
- Skill Complexity: moderate or significant

If time is a concern, but you have more financial resources, you might want to consider a boarded training situation to have a service dog trainer introduce your dog to more advanced skills. You would then continue with private sessions to refine your dog's skills. Examples might be diabetes alert, allergen detection, or complex medical alert scenarios.

If you have time, and at least some support, but fewer financial resources, you might consider just doing the regular training with a private trainer without boarding.

Typically, you would get the foundation of the more complex disability skills in place before you enter Atlas' program. We would then work with you to refine those skills in the environments you frequent. It is often good to have the parallel support of your private trainer, intermittently, during your work with Atlas.

Please note, even if your dog is starting out with a solid foundation, if you have significant support needs with skills that are significantly complex, but have little support available or time available, self-training through Atlas or in general is not likely a good fit for you.

### **Starting from a dog with temperament or behavior issues**

The first goal is to determine if your dog has behavior or temperament issues that would preclude them from being successful and happy as a service dog. Service dogs experience far more day-to-day stress and stimulation than the typical pet. The analysis needs to include both public safety factors as well as the dog's health and well-being. Just because you could train a dog to just tolerate being in public does not mean it is fair to ask that of a dog six to eight hours a day. Working with a private trainer who specializes in positive behavioral work is the first step. There are some group classes that specialize in dogs with reactivity, but given the specialized nature of service dog training, and the time commitment that will follow even once you resolve any temperament or behavior issues, it is recommended you find an expert to help you.



If you and the trainer determine it is reasonable to work the dog through these issues and they will be able to confidently navigate the world as a service dog, the first step is then to work on those issues.

Once resolved, you and your dog are then back on the same path as either [Starting from an adolescent or partially-trained dog](#) or [Starting from an already well-trained dog](#).

Please be honest with yourself about what is fair to expect of your dog and what level of effort you are willing to put into the training. It may be best to keep your present dog as a pet and companion and start over with a different dog as a service dog candidate. Even if you don't decide to pursue service dog training with your dog, please consider what you can do to improve their quality of life, either through helping to manage their environment for them or through careful and gentle training, or a combination of both.

## **Example Timeline of Preparing for Atlas' Program**

This timeline starts with a puppy and would be applicable whether you are doing group training, private training, or self-training. If your dog is older, just jump into the timeline wherever it makes sense. It really is about the steps the dog goes through and the typical order that is successful. This is not a requirement, but rather a suggested guideline. What works for you and your dog is the most important. The goal with this training is to raise a well-adjusted, well-mannered, happy, confident dog who loves to train and learn. We want you and your dog to understand each other and for you to know what motivates your dog as well as what doesn't. Atlas will then help you work as a team to add the necessary disability skills training and public access work and prepare you for life as a working team. Don't be surprised or discouraged if your dog is older than 14 months before they are ready to enter Atlas' program. We consider that a minimum age. Many dogs mature more slowly. In many cases people need more time to train and prepare their dogs just due to time constraints in their lifestyle. The age ranges below are to be treated as sample age ranges. Dogs mature at different paces and have different needs. Go at the pace of your dog and be prepared to speed up or slow down based on their needs and your ability to commit to their training. Training should always be positive for you and your dog.

Please see [Appendix A](#) for some great puppy and dog training references.

### **Puppy/Dog Selection**

We strongly suggest you hire a trusted private trainer to help you evaluate potential breeders and dogs. If you are starting from a puppy, you are looking at investing at least two years of effort before you are certified as a team. It is worth starting from the best possible genetic background and environment conditions. Not all breeders are created equal. The advantage of starting from a puppy is that you select and control their experiences and don't have baggage to try to fix. You have an opportunity to make an informed decision based on typical characteristics of their breed, the breeder's specific dogs, and the individual themselves. Do yourself and the dog a favor and invest in selecting the best starting point possible. Most reputable breeders who care strongly about puppy early development do not allow you to pick them up until 10 weeks of age.

If you are adopting an adult dog, again, we strongly recommend you hire a trusted trainer to help you evaluate the dog. Many rescue dogs can make great service dogs. Be aware of what is reasonable to ask of your dog. If they are very shy, fearful, or reactive, they will not thrive as service dogs. If they are older, they will have a short working lifespan and may have health issues that make being a service dog unreasonable to expect.



## **Puppy Socialization, Exposure, and Foundations**

10 weeks (or as soon as you get them) – four months of age

Good experiences are what count. It is not just quantity but quality. It is critical to have your puppy experience as many different types of people, places and things as early and often as possible. However, it is only helpful if it is on their terms. The puppy gets to choose if they want to interact. Luring a scared puppy to something with treats is not the preferred socialization or exposure approach. It will often cause a puppy to go past their comfort zone and then find themselves with the scary thing as soon as the treat is gone. Help your puppy have positive experiences on their terms. See [Appendix B](#) for a list of socialization and exposure items and experiences.

Puppy socialization and play classes are critical for your puppy's development. These experiences help them learn bite inhibition and how to communicate with other pups. Even if you have other puppies available in your home, bring your puppy to a positive puppy play and socialization class at least once a week. Most puppy classes require that your puppy has completed their second set of shots in order to attend.

Set your puppy up for success. Give your puppy freedom as they are able to handle it. Use crates, gates, playpens, and careful management of their environment. It is far easier to create a good foundation for your puppy from the beginning than to allow or encourage behavior as a puppy that you must fix as they get older. Don't allow them to mouth you, jump on you, or destroy your household items. While we will all have some "oops," the goal is error-free learning as much as possible. If a puppy has potty accidents in the home, it is our fault as the trainer, not the puppy's fault.

Help your puppy understand that body handling and husbandry like grooming, bathing, nails, and brushing are happy and wonderful activities. Handle all parts of their body regularly and gently. Do not force them or restrain them. Allow them to make the choice to be handled and reinforce that choice.

If you adopt an adolescent or adult dog, much of the same things you would do for a puppy apply. Set them up for success by managing their environment. Introduce them to positive experiences at their pace. Strongly consider an adolescent or adult dog basic obedience or refresher group class to get you off to a good start. One important difference for an adolescent or adult dog vs. a puppy is to give them time to settle in before you jump into exposure and training. Let them build their trust in you and their new environment. Let their personality unfold. Give them at least a couple of weeks before you introduce them to your 50 closest friends. When it comes to body handling with adolescent or adult dogs, go slowly. They may have prior negative experiences. Listen to what they tell you, and go at their pace.

## **Basic manners and obedience**

Three to four months to six to nine months of age (or longer).

The pace depends on the pup, you, and how consistent you are in your training. Some dogs mature more slowly. Some more quickly. It varies by breed, gender, and individual. Some people have the time, patience, ability and desire to train daily. Others do not.

This is the time to keep building basic life skills such as: calm greetings, patience, self-soothing, bite inhibition, house manners, etc. Work to ensure your pup does not develop issues such as demand barking, counter surfing, stealing/begging food, resource guarding, jumping on people, or destroying items that are not theirs. Give them appropriate ways to ask for what they need and want.



This is also the time to teach obedience skills, initially in non-distracting environments where the pup/dog can be successful. Teach skills such as their name, touch, leave it, sit, down, off, recall (coming when called), drop it/give, place, waiting at doorways, staying in position (sit/down/stand) for a brief time, and walking on a loose leash. Crate training is a valuable life skill as you never know when a dog may be hospitalized or need to travel or spend time in a crate. Our resource list in [Appendix A](#) includes great information on positive crate training.

### **Impulse control, and working around distractions**

Begin impulse control and working around distractions after teaching basic manners and when the puppy/dog is sufficiently able to focus, usually 6-9 months or older. This is an ongoing area to practice often until the dog is ready to certify for public access.

Reinforce patience and quiet behavior in your dog. People often ignore a resting dog and react/give attention to a barking or active dog. Remember to quietly reinforce calm behavior. Work on your dog's ability to do basic obedience skills around increasing distractions such as more people, dogs, noise, movement, different locations, etc. Only change one thing at a time on your dog. You want them to succeed.

Work on tasks such as coming when called, even if they are interested in another dog or object, leaving an object when they are interacting with it at a distance from you, or doing stays while balls bounce by. Go slow. Do not push your dog too hard or they will get frustrated and so will you.

### **Intermediate or Advanced Obedience**

Intermediate or advanced obedience is taught after basic manners, often at nine months or older and in parallel with impulse control work. Refinement typically continues until the dog is about 12-18 months of age.

Add in more skills such as formal heel and side, auto stopping when walking on heel and side, working off leash, stand, back, formal recall, longer duration stays, formal seated greetings, and being able to wait or stay when you are out of sight or at a distance. If desired, add in retrieval skills.

Add distractions once they can do these skills in quiet environments. Work toward your dog's ability to vary the distance, distractions, and durations with all of the behaviors described in the basic or advanced obedience sections.

See our Team Assessment for duration, distance, and distraction minimum goals. The more you build your dog's expertise, the better. You want them to work for you and be confident and comfortable in all environments you frequent with them.

### **Optional: Additional training that improves problem solving, joy of learning, and how you and your dog work as a team**

Usually after 9-12 months of age. The dog needs to be experienced in working with you or a trainer to learn new skills, have a good foundation of obedience manners, and have sufficient impulse control.

Some great examples are agility, nosework, rally, or freestyle. Please note, if your dog will be doing a disability task that requires scent detection, seek the advice of a private trainer specialized in scent work before introducing any other nosework items.

In addition to formal classes, problem solving games with food puzzles and hide and seek are great activities with your dog.



### **Optional if needed: Advanced task training/preparatory task training**

Advanced task training usually begins after 12-18 months of age and can be taught in parallel with advanced obedience and impulse control work. Note, if the skill is one that requires any physical pressure on the dog such as for balance or to pull, no work should be done until the dog's growth plates are fully developed, which is usually between 18 months – two years of age.

If you have more advanced disability skill needs that require complex combinations of behaviors done in just the right order, or if you need the dog to make complex discriminating decisions on their own, you will want the support of a private trainer before or during Atlas' program. Examples include diabetes alert, allergen alert, automatic bracing, calling for help, alerting if someone walks within a person's personal space, bringing someone home, etc.

You can also work on foundation tasks that will help you when you need your dog to do disability skills later. Examples include items such as alerting you on your body (vs. hand) with a nose or paw, tugging on objects, up with two paws, jumping on with four paws, retrieval, holding items for extended times, extended stand stays, positioning their body in specific ways next to you, etc.

A private trainer specializing in service dog training, such as an Atlas Certified Trainer, is a great resource for this work. You are welcome and encouraged to have your trainer be part of your team when you start working with one of our Atlas Team Facilitators.

### **Determining if you are ready for Atlas' program**

Review our Pre-Application and Application materials. Go through our Team Self-assessment and honestly rate yourself. Brush up where needed. Let us know when you are ready and how you are progressing. We are happy to answer questions and would love updates at any point along the way. Our goal is for you and your dog to succeed.



## Appendix A: Puppy and Dog Reference List

### Puppies

- [Puppy Start Right](#) by Kenneth and Debbie Martin
- [Control Unleashed the Puppy Program](#) by Leslie McDevitt
- [Perfect Puppy in 7 Days](#) by Dr. Sophia Yin
- [The Toolbox for Building a Great Family Dog](#) by Terry Ryan
- [Life Skills for Puppies](#) by Helen Zulch and Daniel Mills
- [Family Friendly Dog Training](#) by Patricia McConnell and Aimee Moore
- [The Puppy Primer](#) by Patricia McConnell and Brenda Scidmore

### General

- [Don't Shoot the Dog](#) by Karen Pryor
- [Culture Clash](#) by Jean Donaldson
- [The Other End of the Leash](#) by Patricia McConnell
- [How to Behave So Your Dog Behaves](#) by Dr. Sophia Yin

### Body Language and Communication

- [On Talking Terms with Dogs](#) by Turid Rugaas
- [Canine Body Language a Photographic Guide](#) by Brenda Aloff
- [Canine Behavior a Photo Illustrated Handbook](#) by Barbara Handelman

### Web Resources

- [Karen Pryor Clicker Training](#)



## Appendix B: Socialization Checklist

### People

People wearing scarves  
 People wearing bracelets  
 People dancing  
 People of different races  
 Men – Women  
 Mustaches and beards  
 People with hats  
 People wearing glasses  
 Mail carriers  
 Crying babies  
 Toddlers  
 Young children  
 Teenagers  
 Elderly people  
 Kids on skateboards/riding bikes  
 Delivery people  
 People in uniform  
 People with backpacks  
 People with umbrellas  
 Motorcycles  
 Neighborhood children  
 Inline skaters  
 People with various gaits  
 People in costume  
 Joggers  
 Clowns

### Animals

Other puppies  
 Older dogs  
 Dogs of the same breed  
 Dogs of different breeds  
 Dogs of different color, size, shape  
 Intact dogs/bitches  
 Cats  
 Kittens  
 Horses  
 Chickens  
 Cows  
 Gerbils  
 Rabbits  
 Birds  
 Hamsters  
 Lizards

### Daily Touch

Ears  
 Tail  
 Testicles  
 Belly  
 Feet  
 Toes  
 Brush teeth  
 Nails weekly – Dremel  
 Brush coat  
 Head restraint  
 Full body restraint  
 Bath 2x monthly

### Sounds

Alarm  
 Vacuum cleaner  
 Hairdryer  
 Smoke electric shaver  
 Television  
 Loud music  
 Doorbell  
 Knocking on the door  
 The garbage disposal  
 Sirens  
 Fireworks  
 Thunder  
 Lawnmower - snowblower  
 Blender  
 Airplanes  
 Popping balloon  
 Food processor/blender  
 Air brakes on a big truck  
 Horns  
 New year's noisemakers  
 Washer/dryer  
 Loudspeaker  
 Bull horn  
 Musical instruments  
 Alarm clock  
 Gun shots – cap guns

### Things

Feathers  
 Bubbles  
 Skateboards  
 Helium balloons  
 Hot air balloons  
 Construction vehicles  
 Dump trucks/snowplows etc.  
 Agility type tunnel  
 Agility type tire  
 Agility type dog walk  
 Traffic  
 Crowds  
 Play equipment in playgrounds  
 Umbrellas  
 Surfboards  
 Stairs  
 Fans  
 Bags garbage bags  
 Boxes being carried  
 Remote controlled toys  
 Ironing board  
 Garbage trucks  
 Motorcycles  
 Ceiling fan  
 Statues  
 Bicycles  
 Brooms  
 Shovels  
 Trash cans - stationary  
 Kites  
 Automatic sliding door  
 Automatic garage door  
 Wheelchairs  
 Stuffed toys  
 Scooters  
 Crutches  
 Canes  
 Walkers  
 Fax machine - printer  
 Shopping cart  
 Snowman  
 Rolling trashcans/luggage



### Places

Veterinary office Groomer  
Boarding kennels Shopping  
malls outside Schools  
Dog show  
The yards of friends  
Playground  
Preschool  
An elevator  
Crowds of people  
Rides in the car  
Train stations  
Bus stations  
Grocery stores  
Flea market  
Little league game  
Soccer game  
Car repair shop  
Puppy kindergarten  
A firehouse  
Drive-thru McDonald's Hotels  
Car wash  
Tunnel  
The beach  
The woods  
Fields  
Ponds  
Swimming pools Hammock  
A farm  
Walks at dawn: town  
neighborhood – woods/fields  
Walks in the dark: town –  
neighborhood – woods/fields  
Playing in the tub

### Surfaces

Ice  
Shiny/reflective surfaces  
Pile of leaves  
Boxes in, on, and under  
Bubble wrap  
Tarps  
Grates  
Grass  
Dirt  
Pavement  
Rocks  
Rubber mats  
Wood chips  
Slick floors  
Wet floors  
Cement  
Bricks  
Snow  
Sand  
Weeds  
Soft cloths (towel) spongy foam  
Hardwood  
Linoleum  
Bridges  
Water  
Mud  
Logs