



# AAAIP

**Association of Animal-Assisted  
Intervention Professionals**

## Competencies for the Ethical Inclusion of Therapy and Facility Animals

Guidance for the Certified  
AAI Specialist, Therapy Animal Team,  
and their Assessor

*[www.aaaiponline.org](http://www.aaaiponline.org)*

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## Introduction

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This document outlines attitudes, knowledge, skills, and abilities for the professional animal-assisted intervention (AAI) practitioner, therapy animals working in professional settings, and the assessor who evaluates those teams against the relevant competencies. These three sets of evidence-based and peer reviewed competencies articulate that which is specific to AAI in addition to the competencies unique to your vocation.

The **AAI Specialist Competencies** outline the knowledge necessary to practice AAI whether working with your own animal or partnering with volunteer or paraprofessional therapy animal team. The competency statements are the basis for the AAI Specialist Certification (C-AAIS).

The **Therapy Animal Team Competencies** articulate the skills and abilities of both the handler and their therapy animal (generalized for canines). Practical evaluations of teams to assess readiness and safety in interacting with clients should map to these competencies.

The **Therapy Animal Team Assessor Competencies** cover both the knowledge and skills needed by an individual evaluating a handler-animal team against the Therapy Animal Team Competencies.

## AAI Code of Ethics

Whether you are a practitioner incorporating therapy animals into your vocation or someone who assesses the suitability of therapy animal teams, the Code of Ethics can be applied as a set of wide-ranging, non-specific principles that govern decision making in AAI.

- Perform duties that are consistent with your position and training.
- Maintain adequate knowledge of, and adhere to, applicable ethics and professional standards.
- Demonstrate a belief in and attitude of reverence for all life.
- At all times, treat all animals, all people, and the environment with respect, dignity, and sensitivity, maintaining the quality of life and experience for all who are involved.
- Be informed and educated about the current and emerging aspects and issues related to AAI.
- Demonstrate commitment, responsibility, and honesty in all phases of your activities.
- Comply with all local, state, and federal laws that govern AAI.

# Animal-Assisted Intervention Specialist Competencies

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## Domain 1: Animal Welfare and Well-being (~33% of exam)

### 1. Characteristics of Welfare (~21% of domain)

- a. Differentiate between the 5 Freedoms of animal welfare.
- b. Recognize that therapy animals deserve more than basic characteristics of animal welfare.
- c. Identify measures that protect animal welfare within sessions incorporating therapy animals.
- d. Identify measures that protect animal welfare outside of sessions incorporating therapy animals.
- e. Recognize the individualized nature of animal welfare (e.g., species, age, disability, and other individual animal characteristics).
- f. Differentiate between the needs of the client and the therapy animal.
- g. Identify measures that protect an animal's sense of wellness during AAI (e.g., time limits, retreat spaces, rewards).
- h. Identify considerations to be made in determining an animal's quality of life to inform decisions surrounding retirement and end-of-life circumstances.

### 2. Animal Behavior (~13% of domain)

- a. Identify active animal consent.
- b. Identify the various responses a therapy animal can have to a petting consent test (e.g., avoidance, acceptance, enjoyment).
- c. Differentiate between active consent, obedience, and compliance.
- d. Identify an animal's suitability/limitations on a situational basis despite a potential emotional bond with or personal bias towards the animal.
- e. Identify signs of animal stress/fatigue.

### 3. Animal Awareness and Response (~16% of domain)

- a. Identify routine protocols for assessing animal health and well-being.
- b. Identify strategies used to respond to animal stress/fatigue.
- c. Identify an action plan in advance to defuse or eliminate animal stress and any growing risks.
- d. Identify when an animal should be removed from a session/interaction.
- e. Identify when an animal should be retired, based upon behavior.
- f. Identify steps to take during the process of retirement (e.g., preparing the animal, preparing your clients, altering treatment plans as needed).

#### 4. Clients and Animals—Communicating and Intervening (~24% of domain)

- a. Identify a client’s suitability for involvement in AAI (e.g., motor and/or cognitive functioning, prior experiences with animals, history of animal abuse, fit with treatment objectives, psychological conditions associated with anger or violence).
- b. Identify a client’s need for animal-related engagement (e.g., virtual visits, animal-based activities).
- c. Identify appropriate messaging to inform clients about their role in protecting animal welfare.
- d. Identify appropriate strategies for communicating an animal’s actions to clients.
- e. Identify situations when the handler’s attention may be divided between client and animal, to the detriment of either.
- f. Identify strategies for managing conflicts of attention between client and animal.
- g. Identify appropriate instruction for clients to minimize risk of physical/emotional injury to the animal.
- h. Recognize the ways in which the presence of a therapy animal impacts the professional’s relationship with clients.
- i. Recognize how our clients are impacted when it comes time to terminate AAI services or if the animal becomes unwell or dies.

#### 5. Health and Safety (~11% of domain)

- a. Identify environmental factors that promote the animal’s comfort.
- b. Identify routine veterinary care necessary for therapy animals.
- c. Recognize the need to acquire and maintain up-to-date veterinary records for all therapy animals.
- d. Identify health conditions warranting consideration that could potentially preclude an animal from therapy work (e.g., blindness, deafness, diabetes, thyroid disease).

#### 6. Encouraging a Sense of Thriving (~11% of domain)

- a. Identify tactics for providing therapy animals with freedom of choice in session.
- b. Classify interactions that are mutualistic for clients and therapy animals.
- c. Identify appropriate rewards to give to therapy animals in session.
- d. Identify the value of a reward based upon the perspective of the animal.

#### 7. Appropriate Language Choices (~5% of domain)

- a. Identify language that does not suggest the “use” of animals in AAI (e.g., partnering with therapy animals, incorporating therapy animals, working with therapy animals).
- b. Identify language that focuses on treatment outcomes being dependent upon the expertise of the professional, not the animal. (e.g., avoiding language that suggests that

the animal caused treatment objectives to be met when it can be more appropriately described as the intervention as a whole impacting change).

## Domain 2: Zoonosis and Infection Prevention (~13% of exam)

### 1. Common Sources of Zoonosis (~33% of domain)

- a. Identify the most common methods of disease transmission in AAI.
- b. Identify the most common zoonotic disease risks (e.g., salmonella).
- c. Distinguish between zoonosis and other infections.
- d. Define reverse zoonosis.
- e. Recognize that sources of zoonosis differ by species.

### 2. Best Practices for Mitigation (~47% of domain)

- a. Identify conditions of the animal's health that would preclude safe interactions.
- b. Identify conditions of the handler's health that would preclude safe interactions.
- c. Identify preventative measures/opportunities to mitigate risks of infection prevention (e.g., hand hygiene, vaccination, preventative meds, raw diet, bathing, grooming, cleaning, barriers).
- d. Identify special considerations for infection prevention based on facility type (e.g., hospital).
- e. Identify special considerations for population-specific infection prevention risks (e.g., health status).
- f. Recognize the need for specific protocols to be in place when working with volunteer therapy animal handlers (e.g., health screening, appropriate vaccines).
- g. Recognize that risk of infection spread is impacted by conditions unique to the setting (e.g., indoor vs. outdoor, population density).

### 3. Considerations for Prevention Protocols (~20% of domain)

- a. Recognize that there are illnesses that therapy animals and people can be protected from by following infection prevention best practices.
- b. Identify methods to inform clients of the risks associated with AAI during the consent process.
- c. Recognize the need for/importance of animal-friendly cleaning and disinfecting protocols.

## Domain 3: Animal Behavior Awareness (~19% of exam)

### 1. Animal training and understanding an affiliative nature (~32% of domain)

- a. Identify species-appropriate trained behaviors (e.g., sit, down, stay for dogs; step up for birds; walk on, whoa, stand in place for equines).

- b. Recognize the rationale for a therapy animal having predictable and directable behaviors as achieved through the training process.
- c. Identify times in which training cues should not be used to motivate therapy animal behavior.
- d. Identify approaching behaviors.
- e. Identify avoidant behaviors.
- f. Identify an affiliative nature.
- g. Identify when an animal is acting with agency (i.e., based on consent) rather than compliance.

## 2. Positive Training Methodologies (~23% of domain)

- a. Distinguish between compulsive training methodologies as compared to positive/relationship-based methodologies.
- b. Classify training techniques as appropriate or inappropriate.
- c. Recognize positive training methodology perspectives.
- d. Recognize the rationale for always using positive training methods and avoiding fear-based or coercive training methods.
- e. Distinguish between reactive, proactive, and inactive/passive handling.

## 3. Handling Best Practices (~45% of domain)

- a. Recognize that giving an animal the ability to choose interactions is essential to safety and welfare in AAI.
- b. Recognize that interpreting and responding to body language cues is essential to safe AAI.
- c. Distinguish between proactive and reactive stress management of an animal.
- d. Identify closure strategies that balance the needs of animal and client.
- e. Identify characteristics of appropriate clientele for an individual animal.
- f. Identify appropriate positioning for an animal that balances the needs of animal and client.
- g. Recognize how the handler's bond/connection with the animal protects all parties in the intervention.
- h. Identify strategies for directing the animal through voice or hand signals.
- i. Identify ways to support an animal in changing environments/situations (e.g., sudden movement or sound).
- j. Identify appropriate approaches for incorporating different species of therapy animals (e.g., prey animals like rabbits, and large animals like horses).

## Domain 4: AAI Foundations (~16% of exam)

### 1. Key Terminology (~28% of domain)

- a. Differentiate between these terms: animal-assisted interventions, animal-assisted therapy, animal-assisted education, animal-assisted activities, animal-related engagement.
- b. Differentiate between registered and certified when discussing therapy animals.
- c. Recognize the relevance of One Health within AAI.
- d. Define human-animal bond.
- e. Define human-animal interaction.

### 2. Different Animal Roles (~17% of domain)

- a. Differentiate between the various kinds of animal roles: therapy animal, assistance animal (commonly referred to as service animal), emotional support animal, facility animal.
- b. Differentiate between the accommodation rights of each animal based on the animal's role.
- c. Recognize dangers of misrepresentation of therapy animals.

### 3. Advocacy for the Field (~17% of domain)

- a. Identify communication strategies that can be used to clearly educate clients about therapy animals.
- b. Identify best practices that should be represented in any involvement in empirical research with therapy animals.
- c. Recognize that involvement in research results in contributing to the evidence base to support AAI.

### 4. State of the Literature (~28% of domain)

- a. Recognize that there is empirical literature to support AAI interventions in assisting with mental and physical health and well-being across the lifespan.
- b. Identify the resources that should be used to stay up to date on the state of the research.
- c. Recognize that there are still gaps in the literature related to AAI.
- d. Identify significant limitations in the existing AAI literature (e.g., lack of randomization, small sample sizes, lack of study replication).
- e. Recognize the inappropriateness of overgeneralizing or making stronger claims than are justified based on the existing empirical evidence.

### 5. Common Theories Applied to AAI (~11% of domain)

- a. Recognize the application of the Biopsychosocial Model as theoretical support for AAI.
- b. Recognize that there are other common psychological theories relevant to specific aspects of AAI (e.g., attachment theory).



## Domain 5: Professional Best Practices (~19% of exam)

### 1. Documentation (~36% of domain)

- a. Identify key aspects to include in AAI informed consent documentation.
- b. Identify areas specific to therapy animals that should be consistently documented (e.g., training, health records, evaluation records, working logs).
- c. Recognize the need for working logs that regularly document the animal's behavior whether it be weekly, monthly, biannually, or other consistent time frame.
- d. Recognize that AAI should be reflected in treatment planning notes.
- e. Recognize the need for documenting the practitioner's well-supported rationale for incorporating AAI.
- f. Identify a system for identifying, tracking, and resolving incidents and perceived incidents.
- g. Recognize the need for an individualized risk assessment prior to beginning AAI with a client, and the need for periodic routine risk assessment.
- h. Recognize the need to document the process of informing clients of the risks associated with AAI during the consent process.

### 2. Special Considerations (~28% of domain)

- a. Identify social and cultural factors relevant to AAI and multicultural implications of human-animal interactions.
- b. Recognize the impact of fears and phobias in AAI.
- c. Identify common misconceptions of common therapy animal species/breeds (e.g., certain breeds of dogs are more suited for therapy work).
- d. Identify inaccurate generalizations of common therapy animal species (e.g., small is more appropriate).
- e. Identify history and cultural oppression associated with common animal species/breeds.
- f. Identify contraindications for non-domesticated and exotic species as therapy animals (e.g., lack of empirical support and/or safe and ethical standards of practice for programs with animals such as dolphins).

### 3. Competencies (~18% of domain)

- a. Identify knowledge competencies for AAI practitioners including: formal AAT training, in-depth animal knowledge, and knowledge of existing ethical requirements.
- b. Identify skill competencies for AAI practitioners, including proficiency in basic vocational skills, intentionality, and having a specialized skill set.
- c. Identify attitude competencies for AAI practitioners, including professional values and the commitment to animal advocacy and professional development.
- d. Recognize that competency levels vary according to a person's level of knowledge, skill, and attitude.

#### 4. Different Approaches to AAI (~18% of domain)

- a. Distinguish between the triangle and diamond approaches to AAI.
- b. Identify the factors that should be considered in selecting which approach (triangle vs. diamond) to use.
- c. Identify best practices when utilizing a volunteer handler and their therapy animal (e.g., HIPAA training, any specialized population/context training, background checks).
- d. Identify strategies for animal-related engagement (e.g., virtual visits, animal-based activities) when face-to-face visits aren't appropriate.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### How were the AAI Specialist Competencies developed?

A panel of 15 experts was convened to create a draft of the foundational body of knowledge and refining the draft over a series of independent reviews and web conference discussions. The draft was then empirically validated by surveying 217 AAI professionals who reviewed the knowledge and skill statements for accuracy, completeness, and relevance.

### Who can be an AAI Specialist?

Professionals who successfully obtain their *AAI Specialist Certification* will have demonstrated an awareness of these knowledge areas addressed in the competencies and are thus prepared to adhere to best practices in AAI that protect client safety and animal welfare. A Certified AAI Specialist (C-AAIS) may work in a variety of settings that incorporate therapy animals. AAI Specialists may be practitioners who handle therapy animals themselves, those who partner with volunteers or paraprofessionals who handle therapy animals under their supervision, and those who coordinate or administrate therapy animal programs.

### How was the certification exam developed?

Once the competencies were created, a group of AAI subject matter experts were convened to write exam questions that map to the knowledge and skill statements that make up the competencies, with the oversight of a psychometrician. The result was a 125-question exam addressing the 115 statements across 5 different domain areas that were deemed essential during competency development. The exam does not cover content specific to any vocation, field, or practice, although some questions are written as scenarios and may mention a role such as occupational therapist as a way of providing context.

### What rules or guidelines govern Certified AAI Specialists (C-AAIS)?

In addition to the AAI Code of Ethics, all those holding a C-AAIS credential are bound by a *code of conduct* that outlines behaviors and attitudes that justify public trust and confidence, enhance the reputation of AAI, and safeguard the welfare of individual clients and participating animals.

### How do I apply to take the certification exam?

Visit [www.aaiponline.org/certificationpage](http://www.aaiponline.org/certificationpage) for more information.

# Therapy Animal Team Competencies

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## Domain 1: Handler Behaviors

### 1. Handler Competencies

- a. Recognize the animal's body language, including signs of contentment, concern, or stress, while keeping in mind that body language cues differ by individual animal.
- b. Interpret the animal's body language and respond appropriately using a supportive approach.
- c. Proactively anticipate the animal's response to the environment (e.g., physical, social, etc.) and make choices (including supportive actions) to optimize the situation for the animal.
- d. Recognize the difference between behaviors which are requested by the handler and behaviors which are voluntary.
- e. Demonstrate an appropriate awareness of/attentiveness to the animal at all times (e.g., split attention between the animal and other situations when necessary).
- f. Groom the animal appropriately (e.g., clean, untangled coat; nails smooth and shortened; no foul odors coming from mouth or ears, etc.)
- g. Consider the animal's emotional and physical well-being and refrain from participating in sessions when necessary (e.g., animal has an unacceptable body condition/score, is unable to ambulate, shows respiratory distress, shows other signs of distress, etc.).

### 2. Interactions with the Animal

- a. Regularly and appropriately praise, encourage, and reassure the animal during interactions through the use of touch, mutual eye contact, verbal cues, and close proximity.
- b. Use a respectful, conversational tone of voice when addressing the animal (i.e., not pleading, angry, or harsh).
- c. Enable the animal to make choices about interactions (i.e., handler does not coerce interactions).
- d. Use positive reinforcement methods of training to encourage desirable behaviors.
- e. Never use physical intimidation (e.g., striking, ear pinching, shock collars, etc.) to punish or coerce behavior.
- f. Demonstrate proper leash skills while animal is leashed (i.e., the leash is used to guide but not control the animal).

### 3. Interactions with the Client

- a. Ask for consent from the client before an interaction begins.
- b. Tactfully intervene when necessary and redirect the client to change or cease their actions if needed to ensure the animal's well-being.

- c. Interact with the client professionally, respectfully, empathetically, and in a conversational manner.
- d. Provide appropriate closure to the interaction with the client.

#### 4. Interactions with the Animal and Client

- a. Proactively introduce the animal to the client, providing clear instruction on how the client should interact with the animal (e.g., the client should not need to ask how to best pet the animal or if they like belly rubs, the handler should instruct how to safely give the animal a treat, etc.).
- b. Lead clients through interactions with animals, making sure to inform them that interactions are dependent upon the animal's preferences.
- c. Position the animal, or if necessary, carry a small animal in a manner that promotes animal/client interaction, is optimal and safe for the client, and is in the best interest of the animal's well-being.

### Domain 2: Animal Behaviors

#### 1. Basic Appropriate Animal Behavior

- a. Demonstrate core obedience skills, including, but not limited to, keeping all feet on ground when greeting, and properly responding to "sit", "down", "stay", "wait", "come", "leave it".
- b. Demonstrate proper leash skills while leashed (e.g., the animal does not pull/strain when on a leash).
- c. Be house trained and not eliminate indoors.
- d. When necessary, accept being handled/touched with handler's assistance or guidance (e.g., feet touched, ears lifted, and similar), and without displaying excessive stress signals or overstimulation.

#### 2. Animal's Behavior with Handler

- a. Demonstrate/maintain a connection to the handler (e.g., frequent eye contact, looks to the handler for direction, etc.).
- b. Respond to handler's cues in a timely manner without demonstrating significant discomfort or distress.
- c. Recover promptly (may include redirection) from stress/negative stimuli with the support of the handler before beginning further interactions.

#### 3. Animal's Behavior with Client

- a. Generally demonstrate relaxed/content body language throughout the entire session and during interactions with clients.

- b. Generally demonstrate approaching behaviors and seek out interactions with clients (e.g., nudging face/nose against client, presenting toy to client, etc.) after checking in with handler.
- c. With the direction and support of the handler, demonstrate an appropriate level of eagerness (e.g., orients head towards client, open mouth, relaxed facial expression, etc.) and physical interaction (e.g., animal should not demonstrate excessive vocalization, mouthing, uncontrolled exuberance, jumping up on people/furniture, etc.).

## Frequently Asked Questions

### What is a therapy animal team?

A therapy animal team is defined as a unique handler-animal pair working together to deliver any form of AAI including animal-assisted therapy (AAT), animal-assisted education (AAE), and animal-assisted activities (AAA). The handler may be a paid professional, paid paraprofessional, or an unpaid volunteer.

### What is the difference between a registered and certified therapy animal team?

Although the lexicon is often conflated, certification is when an individual – or in this case, a team – completes an assessment designed to verify education, training, or experience gained elsewhere. Volunteer-based therapy animal programs are registrations which convey privileges, benefits, or services such as insurance coverage, or volunteer placement, when you meet the specific criteria to enroll as a member of the group. For more examples, see this [infographic](#). Regardless of whether you pursue certification or a registration, all therapy animal evaluations should align with the evidence-based competencies for therapy animal teams.

### Why do therapy animal teams need to be assessed?

An independent third-party assessment helps ensure safe therapy animal interactions. While therapy animal handlers often know their animal best, it can be hard to be objective about your own pet. For this reason, insurance providers often want to see evidence that a team has been evaluated and continues to be evaluated on a recurring basis. As a responsible handler, you may also wish to be evaluated as a team to see if there are any areas in which you need to improve.

### How are therapy animal teams assessed?

Historically there have been limited options for professionals seeking therapy animal team assessments. Many have opted to be evaluated by a volunteer therapy animal program as the best possible option for demonstrating participation in an objective, third-party evaluation. Realizing that volunteer evaluations were not intended to measure professional aptitude, AAAIP has developed a team assessment option for professionals based on the competencies specific to the role.

### What are the standards for therapy animal team assessments?

The goal of a team assessment is to ensure that a therapy animal and their handler have the baseline skills to be both safe and effective when interacting with others. These baseline skills are articulated in the Therapy Animal Team Competencies. Additionally, team assessments should address the relevant [Standards of Practice in AAI](#). These include recurring assessments not to exceed every three years, a practical location that simulates a setting where interactions will take place, and an evaluator with relevant training about the species as well as AAI with whom the animal is not overly habituated.

### How were the competencies determined?

As with the skills and knowledge statements for the AAI Specialist role, the therapy animal team competencies were developed by a team of ten subject matter experts consisting of dog trainers, animal

behaviorists, veterinarians, service dog trainers, allied health professionals with AAI expertise, and current therapy animal team evaluators. They created a draft of skills statements for both the animal and the handler. These skills statements were then empirically validated by surveying 200 AAI stakeholders, 96% of whom had direct experience handling therapy animals and 71% of whom had practical experience evaluating therapy animals in some capacity.



# Assessor Competencies

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## Domain 1: General AAI Knowledge (~24% of the exam)

1. Identify measures that protect animal welfare within sessions incorporating therapy animals.
2. Recognize the individualized nature of animal welfare (e.g., species, age, disability, etc.)
3. Identify measures that protect an animals' sense of wellness during AAI (e.g., time limits, retreat spaces, rewards).
4. Identify strategies used to respond to animal stress/fatigue.
5. Identify health conditions warranting consideration that could potentially preclude an animal from therapy work (e.g., blind, deaf, diabetes, thyroid disease).
6. Identify language that does not suggest the 'use' of animals in AAI (e.g., partnering with therapy animals, incorporating therapy animals, working with therapy animals”).
7. Recognize that giving an animal the ability to choose interactions is essential to safety and welfare in AAI.
8. Recognize that interpreting and responding to body language cues is essential to safe AAI.
9. Recognize how the handler's bond/connection with the animal protects all parties in the intervention.
10. Differentiate between the terms: animal-assisted interventions, animal-assisted therapy, animal-assisted education, animal-assisted activities, animal-related engagement.
11. Differentiate between registered and certified when discussing therapy animals.
12. Differentiate between the various kinds of animal roles: therapy animal, assistance animal (commonly referred to as service animal), emotional support animal, facility animal.
13. Identify common misconceptions of common therapy animal species/breeds (e.g., certain breeds of dogs are more suited for therapy work).
14. Identify inaccurate generalizations of common therapy animal species (e.g., small is more appropriate).
15. Identify contraindications for non-domesticated and exotic species as therapy animals (e.g., lack of empirical support and/or safe and ethical standards of practice for programs with animals such as dolphins).

## Domain 2: Animal Behavior and Training Knowledge (~37% of the exam)

1. Identify active animal consent.
2. Identify the various responses a therapy animal can have to a petting consent test (e.g., avoidance, acceptance, enjoyment).
3. Identify appropriate rewards to give to therapy animals in session.
4. Differentiate between active consent, obedience, and compliance.

5. Identify tactics for providing therapy animals with freedom of choice in session.
6. Distinguish between reactive, proactive, and inactive/passive handling.
7. Identify signs of animal stress/fatigue.
8. Identify when an animal should be removed from a session/interaction.
9. Distinguish between proactive and reactive stress management of an animal.
10. Identify when an animal should be retired, based upon behavior.
11. Identify species-appropriate trained behaviors (e.g., sit, down, stay for dogs/step-up for birds/walk on, whoa, stand in place for equines).
12. Identify approaching behaviors.
13. Identify avoidant behaviors.
14. Identify an affiliative nature.
15. Identify when an animal is acting with agency (i.e., based on consent) rather than compliance.
16. Recognize the rationale for a therapy animal having predictable and directable behaviors as achieved through the training process.
17. Identify times in which training cues should not be used to motivate therapy animal behavior.
18. Distinguish between compulsive training methodologies as compared to positive/relationship-based methodologies.
19. Classify training techniques as appropriate or inappropriate.
20. Recognize positive training methodology perspectives.
21. Recognize the rationale for always using positive training methods and avoiding fear-based or coercive training methods.

### **Domain 3: Assessment Skills (~39% of the exam)**

1. Assess handler's ability to recognize the animal's body language.
2. Assess handler's ability to interpret the animal's body language.
3. Assess handler's ability to optimize situations for their animal.
4. Assess handler's ability to distinguish between animal behaviors based on consent versus compliance.
5. Assess handler's ability to maintain an appropriate awareness of their animal at all times.
6. Assess handler's ability to groom their animal appropriately.
7. Assess if the animal presents with any observable health concerns that would prevent the assessment from taking place (e.g., animal has an unacceptable body condition/score, is unable to ambulate comfortably, shows respiratory distress, shows other signs of distress, etc.)
8. Identify if/when the handler's support, praise, encouragement, or reassurance has a positive impact on the animal.

9. Recognize when an appropriate (i.e. respectful, conversational) tone of voice is used by the handler with their animal.
10. Recognize when the handler allows the animal to make choices about the interactions.
11. Recognize if a handler uses physical intimidation with their animal to punish or coerce behavior.
12. Recognize proper leash skills (e.g., most of the time, the leash doesn't have any tension in it and/or does not have to be utilized as a tool to control the animal)
13. Identify if/when the handler obtains verbal consent prior to interactions.
14. Identify if/when the handler redirects client behavior in support of animal well-being.
15. Recognize professional/respectful interactions by the handler with the client.
16. Recognize when the handler prepares and/or leads clients through interactions based upon the animal's preferences.
17. Identify if/when the handler proactively positions the animal in a way that promotes interaction, safety, and animal well-being.
18. Recognize a connection/bond between the handler and animal.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### How were the competencies determined?

The assessor competencies were unique in that they pull from the AAI Specialist competencies as well as the Therapy Animal Team competencies. Based on that draft, these skill and knowledge statements were then empirically validated by surveying 54 AAI stakeholders, 81% of whom had experience as an animal trainer or behaviorist and 69% of whom had practical experience handling a therapy animal.

### Can an assessor become certified?

Yes, AAAIP has a certification program for assessors who conduct AAAIP's propriety assessment for therapy animal teams doing paid work in professional settings. You can learn more [here](#).

### How was the certification exam developed?

Once the competencies were created, a group of AAI subject matter experts were convened to write exam questions that map to the knowledge and skill statements that make up the competencies, with the oversight of a psychometrician. The result was an 84-question exam addressing the 54 statements across 3 different domain areas that were deemed essential during competency development.

### Who can be an AAAIP Certified Assessor?

Assessors must be age 18 or older with at least two years' experience working with dog owners and their dogs in a professional capacity, including but not limited to obedience instructor, trainer, behaviorist, veterinary technician, or AAI provider. This experience may not include informally helping friends and family with their dogs. Additionally, assessors should possess experience working with a variety of breeds/types of dogs and have a commitment to force-free training principles and tools that do not cause any pain, discomfort, or intimidation to the animals involved.

### What rules or guidelines govern AAAIP Certified Assessors?

In addition to the AAI Code of Ethics, all AAAIP Certified Assessors are bound by a [program agreement](#) that outlines the standards required to maintain the credential.

### How do I apply to take the certification exam?

Visit [www.aaaiponline.org/certificationpage](http://www.aaaiponline.org/certificationpage) for more information.

# Appendix

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Members of the Association of Animal-Assisted Intervention Professionals established vocational workgroups to discuss the Competencies and any additional considerations that should be made according to the professional discipline of the AAI provider. Thematic analysis of the notes from these discussions identified the following suggestions by discipline.

## Educational/School Settings

- Providers should be prepared to provide training sessions on expectations for involvement in therapy animal programming to all program stakeholders. This includes teachers, support staff, administration, and students.
- Providers should be able to clearly articulate their plan to provide the animal with frequent breaks based on the animal's unique needs and preferences.
- When evaluating therapy animals in this setting:
  - Emphasize the animal's response to large group settings and the handler's ability to incorporate additional staff support for crowd management when necessary.
  - With the direction and support of the handler, demonstrate a relaxed state in response to drills that commonly take place in the facility.

## Medical Settings

- Providers should prepare staff with education about benefits & limitations and identify strategies to manage facility, organization or colleague partner expectations regarding benefits and limitations of incorporating animal-assisted support.
- Evaluate and establish organizational framework that promotes positive human and animal welfare and supports animal advocacy.
- Providers must be prepared with strategies to manage interactions between both the people receiving medical services as well as any guests/visitors who might be in the room.
- AAI program coordinators should serve as a resource and support to all therapy animal teams.

## Mental Health & Social Work

- Additional considerations to encourage a sense of thriving for animals in these settings include:
  - Setting up the workspace in a way that allows the animal to move freely into a place for rest/play as it wishes,
  - Limits on the animal's workday based on the animal's needs.
- Human-Animal Relational Theory and Wenger's Community of Practice Theory are important theoretical frameworks to guide animal-assisted interventions.
- Providers should be prepared to integrate AAI within trauma-informed care, especially as it relates to proximity when positioning animal/handler/client.

## Occupational Therapy

- Professionals should be able to identify strategies for grading activities with the therapy animals to meet varying needs of each client (e.g. changing client or animal positioning, changing specific tools or toys incorporated, or even incorporating extra elements into a therapeutic session/interaction.)
- Additional documentation considerations: Identify when treatment goals have been met so that AAI can be discontinued & identify the steps required for appropriate billing based on standard billing practices.
- When evaluating therapy animals in this setting:
  - Any equipment that is commonly encountered in the workplace should be incorporated in the therapy animal's assessment. This includes medical equipment as well as equipment the animal might wear such as vests that have buckling mechanisms.
  - Any novel activities that the professional plans to incorporate in session should be included in the team's assessment. For example, retrieving, tugging, or taking treats from tongs.
  - Demonstrate comfortability in kennel space if kennel is to be used during AAI.
  - With the direction and support of the handler, demonstrate a relaxed state in response to drills that commonly take place in the facility.

## Correctional Environments

- Providers should be prepared to offer training to all staff to communicate expectations and help obtain stakeholder buy-in.
- When evaluating therapy animals in this setting:
  - Animal's reaction to added security features should be assessed such as gates, buzzers, doors, metal detectors, handler security screening/search, etc.
  - Animal's response to unique environmental stimuli should be assessed such as slippery floors, banging/echoing, people behind barriers, etc.

