

Is Your Dog a Good Citizen?

By Beth Nolley

Do you think your Papillon is a well-mannered, good dog citizen? If so, did you know the American Kennel Club offers a title for dogs who have passed a test certifying that they are indeed Canine Good Citizens? This test consists of 10 items, which are listed at the end of this article, and must be given by an AKC Canine Good Citizen (CGC) Certifier. If your dog passes, she will earn the CGC ranking after her AKC registered name.

This test goes beyond basic obedience skills and allows a dog to demonstrate that she has good manners in many everyday situations, such as meeting strangers, and can also handle more infrequent encounters, such as seeing people in wheelchairs or hearing loud noises.

Greta Brake, of Vienna, Va., wanted her Papillon, Bella, to achieve the CGC classification in order to help her learn to act appropriately in public so that she could take Bella more places. "I take her out in her stroller to eat at restaurants that have outside dining," said Brake. "Every time I take her out with me I get a compliment on how well-behaved she is. People say she is better behaved than a child. This is the reason I had her take the CGC test!"

An added benefit, said Brake, is the CGC test and preparatory classes helped improve Bella's socialization with people. "Bella is shy by nature, but I can talk to her using the lessons we learned practicing for the test and she is very well-behaved around people and other dogs," said Brake.

Gloria Williams, also of Vienna, Va., enrolled several of her Papillons in the CGC course that ended with the CGC certification test. Williams said she was interested in working towards the CGC for her dogs because of the good socialization opportunities the experience provides. "It helps dogs get over fears," said Williams. Her Papillon, Lexi (pictured below with her CGC award) learned to remain comfortable around such things as wheelchairs and umbrellas, as well as walking between strangers.



Lynne Dunham, of Wonderful Friends Dog Training of Northern Virginia and an AKC Canine Good Citizen (CGC) Certifier, said that most people who enroll their dogs in CGC preparatory classes and take the test afterwards do so to earn the initials CGC after their dog’s registered name. “It is something to be proud of with your dog that they have earned the title of a well-mannered dog,” said Dunham.

Some CGC graduates move on to become therapy or service dogs. “Many dog therapy groups insist on the dog having their CGC certification before they can take the Therapy Dog International test,” said Dunham.

Dawn Couture, of Sterling, Va., successfully completed the CGC test with her Papillon, Rudy, who also went on to pass the Therapy Dog test. “It’s a nice indicator that your dog is a ‘good citizen,’” said Couture. “If you are considering doing therapy dog work, then the test is the first step. My foster dog, Tia (a PCART rescue dog), needs more obedience training, but would be a great therapy dog, especially with kids. She just loves them.”

Dunham described each step of the CGC test and commented that many people whose dogs have had previous training can just show up on the day of the test and pass. “Also, there are classes in which you go over all of the CGC testing elements to help them prepare for the test,” said Dunham.

The Canine Good Citizen test consists of the following 10 steps:

1. Loose leash walking, including left and right turn.
2. Remaining calm while owner greets a stranger and another dog: Most dogs sit while the people shake hands, but the tested dog can't interfere with the strange dog or be too nosy; any lunging or growling is a failure.
3. Walking through a crowd of people with no reaction.
4. Sitting politely for a stranger and allowing a stranger's petting while sitting.
5. Allowing brushing from a stranger.
6. Reacting calmly to distraction: Evaluator will make a strange noise, like dropping something a behind the dog's back while walking away. The dog may turn and look or even jump a little, so long as the dog doesn't show signs of not being able to control himself, such as lunging uncontrollably.
7. Supervised separation: Owner must leave the dog out of sight on leash with a stranger for three minutes. The person holding the dog is allowed to speak to the dog and calm him (as long as it is not excessive). Lunging, crying, or being unable to settle is grounds for failure.
8. Sitting and staying while owner walks on a long leash at 10 feet.
9. Performing down and stay while owner walks away on a long leash at 10 feet.
10. Performing distance recall: Owner chooses sit or down and goes 20 feet on leash away from dog and calls him to come.

Working towards the Canine Good Citizen award, as with any sort of training activity you do with you dog, strengthens your mutual bond by providing the opportunity to spend quality time working towards something together. "I personally work with Bella at least 5 to 10 minutes everyday to keep up her obedience training, including the things she learned in order to take her CGC test," said Brake. "I personally do not think she needs the refreshment everyday because she is so smart, but I do it to spend dedicated time with her."

"Just find what motivates them and work a little each night and they will be ready in no time," said Couture.