Familiarity FAQ

What does the Team Evaluator Policies and Procedures manual say about familiarity issues between the evaluator and animal in an evaluation setting?

An evaluator who’s familiar with the animal in a team shouldn’t evaluate that team. An evaluator is considered “familiar” with the animal if the animal has become habituated enough to the evaluator that its behavior is influenced either positively or negatively. You might become familiar with a team as the instructor or assistant of obedience, agility or “therapy dog” training, or through grooming, friendship or similar interactions that bring you and the team together on a regular basis. However, if you only interact with the team when it’s evaluated, you wouldn’t be considered “familiar” with the team.

What does the Team Evaluator Policies and Procedures manual say about familiarity issues between the evaluator and handler in an evaluation setting?

It’s important that team evaluators be seen as fair and unbiased in their decisions. For this reason, don’t evaluate close friends or family members. Ultimately, you’re responsible for making the final judgment about whether you’re too close to the team to make a fair assessment. However, in situations where your relationship with the team might open you up to questions of bias, it’s best to have another evaluator conduct that team’s evaluation.

Why is familiarity an important issue?

Many evaluators assume familiarity is only about bias. That is one important factor, certainly, because ability to be unbiased is often reduced when an evaluator is quite familiar with a handler or an animal. However, familiarity is also an important issue because, if a handler or animal is quite familiar with an evaluator or space, it can impact how they ‘perform’ in an evaluation. For example, if an evaluation is held in a doggie daycare and a dog has been there – the animal may become nervous that it will be left there. Or perhaps the dog has been habituated to fun playtime in that space and may be less inclined to follow commands during the evaluation. The familiarity rules are in place to give the evaluator the most accurate ‘snapshot’ of a team and familiarity can often create a better or worse snapshot depending on the situation.

Imagine a worst case scenario: a therapy animal seriously injures someone during a visit and a lawsuit is filed. The first question everyone would ask is “how was this animal determined to be safe and appropriate as a therapy animal?” In reviewing the evaluation for the team, if it was determined that there was a possible chance that the evaluation was not objective, that would negatively impact both the individual evaluator as well as the Therapy Animal Program.
I don’t understand the difference between the definitions of “familiar” in the real world versus the therapy animal world.

In a general sense, one might define “familiar” as anyplace or anybody recognizable. In the context of Pet Partners evaluations, however, a passing interaction with a person or space does not constitute familiarity. Such limited interaction will not positively or negatively influence behavior. Evaluators must use their best judgment in determining if familiarity exists, using habituated interaction with an evaluator or space as the benchmark.

If I groom or train and animal, can I also evaluate it?

Usually not. This would fall under the category of “habituated interaction” with the animal. However, if you have not trained or groomed - or provided other care or service - to the animal in many months/years (two years is a good rule of thumb, but it is ultimately at the discretion of the evaluator), the interaction is no longer habituated.

I am friends with a handler who plans to attend my evaluation. Is this a familiarity issue?

It depends. Some people have a hard time remaining unbiased. It may be difficult for a friend to communicate to another friend that their animal is not ready or not appropriate for therapy animal work. You must consider whether you are willing to be the bearer of bad news and absorb the impact it may have on the relationship. You must also deeply consider if you may be more likely to score a friend higher than you would a stranger or acquaintance. For many people, they take into account past experiences, so if you know your friend to be professional and kind, you could be more likely to allow that to impact your handler scores – even if their professionalism and kindness do not come through during the evaluation.

Similarly, we want to encourage all our evaluators to always be above reproach. You want to appear unbiased to outside observers, whether other teams or facilities. By not evaluating your best friend or cousin, you won’t place yourself in a position of receiving complaints from others who may assume (even if it’s not true) that your relationship impacted their evaluation score.

Consider the impact on Pet Partners, you, and your friend – if you were to pass that friend (due to bias) and something negative occurs later at a visit. Bottom line: think through all the scenarios as you consider whether you can remain unbiased.

My husband/wife/child wants to become a handler (or renew as a handler), with me as the evaluator. OK or not?

In this case, familiarity always exists. If the animal lives with you or has lived with you in the past regardless of your direct relationship with the animal, it is impossible to avoid influence.
Tell me more about familiarity with locations.

Certain locations, if familiar, can incite a positive or negative response in handlers and animals. The sights, smells, and sounds might invoke reactions. Different behavior can result in a known setting versus an unknown setting, yet teams will often go into unknown settings – and we need to simulate that experience via the evaluation. How will the animal and handler “perform” when in a new place?

A location is considered familiar if the handler or animal has habitually spent time there in the last two years. Familiarity with location is generally more of a concern for the animal than the human, but both should be considered.

Do I really need to find an experienced assistant when there is an issue of familiarity?

The first choice would be to direct the team to another Pet Partners evaluator nearby. If you’re the only evaluator in your area, an experienced assistant—one who’s unfamiliar with the team—may perform those steps that require an evaluator to interact directly with the animal. The assistant can then relay the information to you to be documented. However, as with any type of alternative evaluation, teams that are evaluated in this manner will only be able to receive a Predictable team qualification rating.

How do I communicate issues of familiarity on the scoresheet?

At the top of the scoresheet, you can mark YES or NO to whether there are issues of familiarity. When answering, please use the Pet Partners’ definition of familiarity as outlined here. This is not a place to tell us if you simply know someone - do not mark YES just because you may have met the handler or animal. Mark YES only if there has been habituated interaction. If you mark YES, then you should also have an experienced evaluation assistant present, per Pet Partners policy.

Why was a change made?

No change has been made to the familiarity policy, except that both new AND renewing teams are subject to the location familiarity rule. Previously, familiarity with location was only a factor for new teams, but it now applies to renewing teams as well. The rest of this policy dates back more than 15 years. In the updating of the scoresheets, we made the decision to reflect items which could impact the score of a team, such as familiarity, which is why it is now included as a question in the scoresheet.

Can you provide some examples of familiarity issues?

**Scenario 1:** Ellen is listed as a prospective handler on your roster. The name doesn’t ring a bell for you, the evaluator. However, upon arrival, you realize Ellen works at your company. You don’t have much interaction with each other, which explains why the name wasn’t familiar. Should you evaluate Ellen and her rabbit?

While you may be only acquaintances (or even less), you must consider if you will be able to give disappointing news to someone you will later see in a professional setting. Will an NR impact your work life? If not, and you feel confident to score, proceed with the evaluation.
**Scenario 2:** You are a dog trainer and worked with Cedar, a golden retriever, and her handler, Mike, in basic obedience classes. You have not seen them in over a year. Should you evaluate Mike and Cedar? The evaluation will take place at the facility where you offered the obedience class.

This scenario has two issues of familiarity present – you know the handler and dog AND the handler and dog are familiar with the space. The presence of both issues means Mike and Cedar should find another evaluation to attend. If this scenario was different and either the space or evaluator was neutral/unknown – it would be up to you, the evaluator, whether you would want to proceed in evaluating Mike and Cedar.

**Scenario 3:** Chris, a member of your local group of therapy animal handlers, needs a renewal evaluation. He asks if he can sign up for your evaluation event next month. Can you evaluate Chris and his dog, Jasmine?

Being a member of such a group does not constitute familiarity. If you only see one another at quarterly meetings – that isn’t habitual familiarity. Additionally, you should consider how often you see Jasmine. If it is rare – again, this is not habitual familiarity.

**Scenario 4:** Your adult daughter wants to evaluate with her new dog. She lives over an hour away and you have only met the dog a few times. Should you evaluate your daughter?

No. While you may not be habitually familiar with the dog, immediate family members (and usually extended family as well) are considered too familiar. Have her evaluate with someone else.

**Scenario 5:** A handler states that she adopted her cat from the humane society – a place at which you hold evaluations. While the handler has only been there once, the cat lived there for several months. The cat was adopted nearly three years ago and this is a re-evaluation. Can this handler and her cat evaluate at the humane society?

Technically, yes. The cat has not been to this particular location in more than three years. Generally, as long as the habitual interaction with the place occurred more than two years ago, it is no longer considered overly familiar. However, it is worth a conversation with the handler. Living in a shelter can be incredibly stressful for an animal, even if that space is a distant memory. It is the handler’s decision.