



Leo Mackey, 9, who has type 1 diabetes, pets family dog Teddy, who can sniff out dangerous blood sugar levels. PHOTOS BY JAE S. LEE / THE TENNESSEAN

New 'trick' could be lifesaver

Pets can sense dangerous blood sugar levels early

By Tom Wilemon
The Tennessean

Leo Mackey will soon have Teddy, the family dog, as a bunk mate.

Teddy is more than a spoiled pet. He's receiving training to become an alert dog that can let Mackey's parents know when the 9-year-old boy with type 1 diabetes is having a hypoglycemic episode — a dangerous dip in blood sugar levels that can cause a seizure or coma.

The Franklin family signed up to be part of a pilot program started this summer by Ann Walling, who is attempting a new approach for training diabetic alert dogs. Instead of teaching young dogs the skills and then placing them with families, Walling is working with the existing family pet — in essence, trying to teach an old dog a new trick.

She cautions that the dogs she trains at Borderland Farms in Franklin are not meant to replace glucose sensors, nighttime checks on diabetic children by their parents or any other monitoring activities.



Steve Mackey, center, and his son Leo throw a disc for Teddy as part of the dog's training.

"It's another tool in the arsenal," said Walling, who raised a child who had type 1 diabetes. "It gives you another measure of stress relief if you know you have got another tool with you helping you monitor this."

Typically, diabetic alert dogs — the ones placed with families — cost thousands of dollars. Although their use has risen in recent

years, the American Diabetic Association has no official position on alert dogs.

Walling, who does agility training for dogs — teaching them to compete in obstacle courses — decided to try the new approach after reading an article about family pets hav-

THE PET TRAINING ENDEAVOR

Borderland Farms owner Ann Walling and dog trainers Melanie Del Villaggio and Patty Wood are developing a program to teach family pets to be diabetes alert dogs.

Cost: \$125 for 10 sessions
Details: Call 615 595-9 or visit www.diabeticalertdogs-borderland.com.

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ing a response to low blood sugar episodes. She trains the dogs to alert their owners when they detect the dangerous glucose levels.

Articles have been published in *Diabetic Medicine* and the *British Medical Journal* that noted changes in the behavior of pets when their owners' glucose levels dropped.

A study published in 2008 in *The Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine* attempted to gain clarity on what has mostly been anecdotal evidence. Its researchers enrolled 212 dog owners with type 1 diabetes to participate in a questionnaire. Just over a third of participants said their dogs showed some type of reaction to a dip in blood glucose levels before they themselves realized they were hypoglycemic.

"Owners of poodles and Bichon Frises were just as likely to report behavioral reactions to their hypoglycemic episodes as the keepers of German shepherds and Labrador retrievers," the researchers wrote. "This is a positive finding in light of how difficult the election and recruitment of dogs for training purposes can be."

Walling and other trainers from her farm went to conferences to learn the

teaching regimen for diabetic alert dogs, then enrolled their first class this summer. Of the four dogs that completed seven weeks of training, three have alerted at some point, she said.

"We feel like we are still in the learning stage," said

Walling, who noted the cost will increase in the future if the program proves successful. "We want to be fair with our customers."

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