

Your Smart Dog New Puppy? Things You Gotta Know! July 2010

What could be cuter than a puppy? Little fluff ball of fur, big soulful eyes, chewing everything, peeing everywhere... There's so much to teach a puppy, we all know that. But what should you teach first? And when should you start teaching? Should you enroll in a puppy class or just wing it all by yourself? This month's newsletter will talk about what you should be doing the first few weeks after you bring your puppy home. There's lots to teach, let's dig in!

When to Teach Puppy

There's no time like the present. Your pup will definitely learn habits - you might as well teach the pup what you want him to do. It's a whole lot easier to teach a puppy what to do from the start, than to try to change habits once they're established.

Start working with your puppy the day you bring him home. Before the pup came home, you had a family meeting and established the rules of the house (you DID do that, right?), so now all you have to do is implement them. Pup's not allowed on the furniture? Fine, when he puts his paws up on the couch, gently place his paws back on the floor and praise him. Pup's not allowed to chew the kitchen table? Perfect, have plenty of doggie chew toys around and simply substitute a squeaky toy for the table anytime you see pup chewing the table.

The most unfair thing you can do for your dog is change the rules as he grows. The little Golden retriever at eight weeks is *so cute* when he jumps to get your attention! But the jumping's not so cute at six months, so do both yourself and the pup a favor and don't reinforce any behaviors now that you don't want him doing later.

What to Teach Puppy

At that family meeting you had before pup came home, you came up with some ground rules. Some are really easy: pup goes *outside* to go to the

bathroom; pup sleeps in his crate; pup will sit to receive petting. Some aren't as obvious: pup will walk nicely on a leash; pup will look to you for permission to do something; pup will give up items easily.

Some people don't know what things to teach their pup. I advise them to make a list of the traits their perfect dog would have: (1) sits

politely, (2) walks nicely on leash, (3) crates easily and quietly, (4) gives up items without a fight, (5) allows nail trims and ear cleaning. Then make a list of the things you can't stand for a dog to do. Many people have these items on their

list: (1) jumping, (2) barking, (3) food stealing, (4) trash-can raiding, (5) playing "keep away" with forbidden objects, (6) pulling on leash, just to name a few.

With both lists, you're now able to create a training plan for your new pup. Work on reinforcing (rewarding) the dog every time he's doing the stuff on the "good" list. Think about what you can teach your dog to do *instead of* what's on the "bad" list. Use both management (crates, baby gates, tethers, leashes, etc.) to prevent the pup from getting into trouble, and also teach the pup what to do to earn rewards.

Common Pitfalls

Some people don't think it's fair to train their 8-week old pup. They want the pup to have time to be a puppy, to have fun. My answer: training IS fun and is the only fair way to introduce a puppy into your household.

Don't let the pup do things now that he'll get in trouble for later. If you don't want your dog to jump on you or on your guests, don't pet or pay attention to him if he puts his paws on you now. Even an 8-week old puppy will learn that

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four paws on the floor is the only way he'll earn attention. And isn't it much fairer to the pup to set clear expectations early instead of changing the game (and the rules) on him later?

The key to getting lots of good behavior from your pup is to look for it!

So many people don't pay any attention to a pup until he's into something he shouldn't be, or until he's in trouble, or until he's a real pain in the

neck. The time to pay attention to your pup is when he's doing something right. If you praise him when he's got it right, he'll get it right more often. The more often he gets it right, the less often he'll get it wrong.

Puppy Class or Not?

I love getting 8-week old pups into my group classes. These pups have the best chance of succeeding for several reasons: (1) their owner is committed to training, (2) the pup is getting crucial socialization, and (3) the pup is learning lots of good stuff right off the bat. As long as your pup is healthy and on a tight vaccination schedule, there's no reason he shouldn't be in puppy class at eight weeks old.

Puppy class has several benefits. The first and most important is socialization. Pups are like sponges and are open to all kinds of learning and experiences until they're between 16 and 20 weeks. After that time, they're much less open to new things and may often become frightened of things they've not yet encountered. A well run puppy class provides a terrific socialization experience for your pup - he'll be gradually exposed to new things in a fun and happy way. He'll learn that the world is a pretty fun place and there's nothing too scary for him to handle.

He'll also learn the most basic good manners behaviors. He'll learn to walk nicely on a leash (instead of pulling you down the block), to give up objects (instead of running and hiding under the bed), to come when called (instead of forcing you to chase him), to sit politely for petting (instead of jumping to get attention), and the list goes on.

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We raise puppies for a local service dog organization and we're on our 9th puppy. The new guy, Teddy, has been with us for one week and he's already learning that a tight leash means he goes nowhere, to go into his crate for

his meals (and to lie quietly after he's finished), to sit for attention, to go to the bathroom on cue, and to look at me when I call his name. We'll be adding lots more to his repertoire over the next few weeks. He's able to

take all this in and will continue to learn more every day.

Your pup may not be destined for service work, but don't sell your puppy short - your pup can be as well mannered as the best service dog out there. Get involved in positive reinforcement training -- and do it early!

Happy training!

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