They’ll Grow Out of It Right?
Don’t IGNORE These Issues...

I love teaching Puppy Charm School classes. Who wouldn’t enjoy 5 or 6 roly-poly puppies running, playing, learning? A common question is “Will my puppy grow out of ________ [fill in the blank]. The short answer is “no.” Puppies don’t usually grow out of anything except their collars. They more often grow into adults with the same bad habits that started in puppyhood. So what’s a good dog owner to do? This month’s newsletter will examine what problems you can let slide and which ones need your attention. We’ll also give you a roadmap to solving those behaviors that time won’t solve.

Barking – Barking usually only gets worse as your pup grows into adulthood. Dogs bark for many reasons – attention, boredom, frustration, alarm, etc. Here’s the trouble with barking: it works! Not many people are able to completely ignore a dog when he barks. Any attention (looking at, talking to, or touching) reinforces that barking. Other dogs like to bark because it breaks the boredom. You can ignore that barking all day long and you won’t cut the barking a bit.

Solution: Find out why the dog is barking. Is it boredom? Frustration? Attention? If the dog is bored (i.e. alone in the yard), give the dog something constructive and entertaining to do. Prevent the problem by allowing the dog in the yard only when you are actively supervising him. If he’s barking for attention, the solution is simple (but not easy): ignore all barking. No talking, touching, or looking at Mr. Barking Dog. Nothing ‘til he’s quiet.

Pulling on the Leash – When a dog pulls on the leash and you follow him (voluntarily or against your will), you’re telling the dog that’s how walks happen. He pulls = you follow. This problem is most easily addressed in puppyhood because (1) your pup isn’t nearly as strong now as he will be in 6 months, so you’re able to hold your ground and (2) your dog hasn’t had a long time to practice (and get better at) pulling.

Solution: Teaching the dog to walk on a loose leash is super easy when he’s still a youngster and hasn’t had a lot of practice pulling on the leash. I recommend a front-clip harness called a Freedom Harness (from Wiggles, Wags and Whiskers). The front-clip harnesses don’t teach your dog to walk on a loose leash, but it does prevent him from getting up a head of steam and pulling you along helplessly.

Jumping – Puppies that jump on people grow into dogs that jump on people. While you may not mind now if your cute nine week old puppy puts his paws on you, I’m betting you will mind later when those paws are muddy and are attached to a larger dog who can rip your hose, dirty your trousers, or knock over small children! Like barking, this is a behavior that we unintentionally reinforce. Your dog jumps on you and you might look at him and say “OFF!” Or maybe you grab his front paws and place them back on the floor while you say “No.” Regardless of your intent, you are reinforcing your dog for jumping. You are looking at, talking to, and/or
touching your dog because he put his paws on you. Any behavior that is reinforced will come back. And it comes back stronger than the last time.

Solution: Teach your dog to sit instead of jumping. This means that you will actively teach a solid “sit,” behavior, then ask your dog to sit before he gets a chance to jump on you. I put that in italics because it’s usually where most dog owners go wrong. They ask their dog to sit only after their dog has already jumped. By doing that, you’re unknowingly making the habit of jumping stronger. If you ask your dog to sit before he has a chance to jump, you’re installing a new pattern: sit for attention. A sitting dog rarely gets into trouble. A jumping dog…it seems as if those guys are always in trouble!

House Training – Dogs need to know that their bathroom is outside. They only way dogs learn this is through consistent and clear direction from you. Puppies learn this very quickly, so be sure to devote time to teaching your puppy where to go to the bathroom. The older a dog is before he’s house trained, the harder this skill is to learn.

Solution: Use crate training in tandem with house training to teach your pup that the only opportunity he has to go to the bathroom is when he’s outdoors. Take your puppy or dog out frequently on a consistent schedule. Praise him as soon as he’s finished his business, then play with him or take him for a walk. When your dog is inside, don’t give him any house-freedom: he’s either tethered to your waist (tie his leash to you) or to a piece of furniture nearby so you can keep an eye on him all the time.

Astute readers will realize that I haven’t mentioned any behaviors that pups grow out of. That’s because there aren’t any behaviors that go away on their own. Anything your pup learns when he’s young will likely stick with him into adulthood. And remember, it’s easier to teach good habits than it is to break old, annoying ones! Be sure you’re actively teaching your dog what to do and generously rewarding him when he does what you ask.

Happy training!
Laurie Luck
Smart Dog University

Puppy Charm School addresses all of these issues directly (and any others that come up with your pup) so be sure to get your pup into classes! If your dog has a few bad habits you’d like to erase, all is not lost!

K9 Building Blocks teaches good manners to dogs of any age. It may take a little while longer to install those good habits, but you might as well start now (before those habits grow deeper and stronger roots)!