



Your Smart Dog

Five Skills Every Dog Should Know

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His name is Nemo. He's twelve weeks old, black, cute, and into everything! He's the latest puppy we're raising for a local service dog organization and he arrived in our laps just a few days ago. We're having fun with him – teaching him basic manners and watching him learn from the other dogs in our household. **I've raised four service dog puppies in the last five years and the basic skills they need aren't any different than what the average pet dog needs.** I consider five skills mandatory learning for all dogs. These are easiest to teach when your puppy is still young, but any dog (at any age) can, and should, learn these skills.

1. Enjoy time alone
2. Walk on a loose leash
3. Sit to greet visitors
4. Say please
5. House training

Enjoy time alone. At some point in your dog's life, he'll have to be alone either at home, kennel, veterinarian office, or groomer. **It's not fair to expect your dog to know how to spend time alone; you must teach him this skill.** Protect your dog (and your house) by using a crate. Begin by creating a good association with the crate – feed your dog in his crate. As soon as he's done, open the door and let him out. Once he's used to that, feed him in the crate with the door closed, and leave

the house for a few minutes. Return and release him from the crate when he's finished his dinner. Gradually extend the time that you're gone, always giving the dog a goodie (stuffed Kong®) as you leave. All the dogs in our house begin to get excited when we prepare to leave, knowing that a delicious goodie is on its way. They pay more attention to the treat filled goodie than to our departure.

Walk on a loose leash. This is a crucial skill for all dogs to learn. Being dragged down the sidewalk is not my idea of a fun time. It's not only annoying, but it's dangerous for you and the dog. Dogs pull because they think that's the way to go for a walk. They don't do it out of spite or to be in charge, they just haven't learned a better way. Their way has always worked, why would they change? It's up to us to teach them what we want them to do. I like using two different methods:

- (1) Reward them when they've got it right (feed tasty treats when the leash is loose)
- (2) Teach them that pulling doesn't work anymore (when the leash gets tight, freeze in place and do not move forward until there is slack in the leash.)

It takes time, but this is one skill that is worth spending the time and energy teaching to your dog. Dogs live about fifteen years, isn't it worth investing a few weeks' time teaching this skill?



Sit to greet visitors. A jumping dog, no matter the size, can be a nuisance. Paws will be dirty or bowl a child over. Nails will snag clothes or scratch skin. Dogs jump for a number of reasons: sheer excitement, attention, in greeting, or because they've never been taught how to properly greet people. **If your dog knows sit, you're well on your way to teaching your how to greet visitors appropriately.** Before guests arrive, put your dog on a leash for control. Have a bowl of tasty tidbits at the front door and have your dog sit before the guests enter. As the door opens, remind your dog to sit and if successful, reward him with a goodie. Your visitor should also ask the dog to sit, if needed. When the dog sits, he gets a goodie AND the visitor's attention. If he doesn't sit, he gets zero attention. The dog will quickly learn that sitting to greet visitors is the only way he can earn attention.

Say Please. This is one of the very first lessons that the service dog puppies learn. Sitting is how they say please. If they want to go outside, they need to sit first. If they want their dinner, they sit before the bowl is lowered to the floor. If they want to go for a walk, they sit to get their leash and collar on. Sit is the minimum "payment" for all things good in their world. It's not a difficult behavior; it's just a way of **developing self-control and partnership between puppy and person.**

Housetraining. Whether you have a puppy or an adult dog, housetraining is an important skill to master. **There are two**

keys to housetraining: (1) developing a schedule and (2) constant supervision.

It became immediately apparent that Nemo was not on any schedule – he went to the bathroom whenever and wherever he felt the urge. After the first accident, I quickly remedied this by taking him outside every 30 minutes on the dot. I also don't allow him out of my sight at any time. If I notice him sniffing and circling, I scoop him up and run outside with him. He immediately does his business and I praise him enthusiastically. Gradually, I'll extend the 30 minutes to 45, then to 60, as his bladder and his brain expand.

Certainly there are many other important behaviors and skills to teach your dog, but if your foundation includes these five, you and your dog are off to a good start. Take stock of what your dog already knows – teach him the skills he's lacking and keep practicing!

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