

So you have a new puppy ! What should you do now??

Socialization

Socializing a new puppy is the most important thing you can do to create a wonderful dog. Many behavior problems in older dogs stem from the simple fact that the dog was not socialized as a puppy. It's easy, it's fun, and it's important!

Dogs have a natural period between 3-12 weeks of age when they are open to learning about their environment. This is an adaptive process that allows puppies to habituate to all the things they will normally encounter in their world. After this period is over they will often avoid novel things. Using their natural flight or fight response, they will try to increase the distance between themselves and anything they were not socialized to.

It is extremely important to introduce the puppy to as many different things (people, animals, sights, sounds, textures, etc) as possible during this socialization period. Because dogs do not generalize well, you should socialize your pup to as many things as possible.

People: women, men, teenagers, children, toddlers, babies, all races, peculiar gaits, handicapped, uniforms, bearded men, people with hats, people acting weird.

All the experiences with these people should be positive, using play or treats. A good suggestion is to have a "stranger treat bag" that you carry. Every time you meet someone new, ask that person to give your puppy a treat.

The puppy should also be exposed to being petted and handled by as many different people as possible.

Situations: crowds, kids on bikes, traffic, car rides, soccer games, different sounds, floor textures, etc. Again, make positive associations with all of these situations using food treats or play.

Other animals: especially other dogs, but also cats, squirrels, livestock, etc.

Exposing puppies to tons of different people, situations, and things in their environment will enable them to cope better with new experiences later in life.

Puppy classes are very helpful for socialization, but it's not enough to just go to class once a week for 5 weeks, you need to do more. An active approach of exposing the puppy to tons of things and making a positive association with them will reduce the risk of fearfulness and aggression in adulthood.

Play with other dogs

It is important to allow puppies to play with other puppies and non-aggressive adult dogs. This is the only way they learn proper canine social skills. Dogs that do not learn "dog language" are tense and antisocial and cannot read other dogs well. They are consequently, at higher risk for dog-dog aggression or fearful reactions to other dogs.

Bite Inhibition

In order for dogs, who have very powerful jaws, to live in social groups nature had to provide a way to prevent serious injury to each other during altercations. We call this bite inhibition, and they learn this best as puppies through the feedback their social partners provide them about their bite strength. We take puppies out of their canine social groups at a very young age, usually at 8 weeks. So it is up to us to not only expose the puppy to other puppies or dogs that will give them this information, but to provide it to them ourselves.

All puppies bite, it is normal puppy behavior. You should not try to completely stop puppy biting until you first instill bite inhibition. When your puppy puts his mouth on you, monitor the lever of pressure he is using. When he bites down hard, scream "OUCH" as though it hurt way more than it did and give him the cold shoulder for a few seconds. This is simulating the feedback the puppy would get from his littermates - "When you bite too hard, I scream, and stop playing". After a few seconds start playing again. Repeat this procedure over and over until you notice he is biting more softly. At this point scream "OUCH" whenever he puts his mouth on your skin, regardless of the pressure. You will be teaching your puppy mouth self-control - or bite inhibition. Once the puppy is only mouthing you with very little pressure, you can start teaching a "don't touch" or "off" command.

Instilling bite inhibition in your puppy will insure a "soft mouth". What this means is that if your dog is provoked or forced to bite as an adult he will not cause as much injury because he will have learned to control the strength of his jaw.

Alone time

Dogs are social animals and genetically are not very well prepared to be alone. It is therefore very important to get your puppy used to being alone. Leave him alone for brief periods of time, over and over. Put him in his crate and leave the room, at first for a short amount of time, and then for longer and longer periods. Give him a chew toy to focus on while he is alone. When you leave do not say "goodbye" or anything else to the puppy - just leave. When you come back, do not say "hello", just come back in the room. If the puppy starts to cry or bark when you leave the room - DO NOT go back in. This will reinforce that behavior and he learns that crying brings you back. Wait for a lull in the crying or barking and then go back.

Physical handling

It is important to handle your puppy as much as possible. The puppy should be handled everyday, preferably by many people. They should stroke the entire body, look inside the ears and mouth, pick up the feet, etc.

In addition to normal handling it is essential to prepare the puppy to be handled in ways that they might find frightening or painful. Most people (and all children) act inappropriately around dogs because they do not understand the things that upset them. The number one bite provoker is some variation on a behavior that humans consider friendly - approach and reaching toward the dog. Owners need to take the time to teach the puppy that human proximity and actions are not threats. Gently and gradually accustom the puppy to accept inappropriate human actions. If done properly, the puppy will quickly come to enjoy these exercises and look forward to being suddenly grabbed, restrained, and stared at.

Proximity — have many people approach the puppy and hand him a food treat. **Staring** — start by holding a food treat by your eye and when the puppy looks up, give the treat. Slowly increase the time he must look into your eyes before he gets the treat. Then have visitors and strangers do the exercise.

Reaching down — repeatedly offer a food treat with one hand and slowly reach down with the other. After a few trials, make contact, first one scratch behind the ear, then two, then several, before each treat.

Grabbing — As the above exercise proceeds, gradually increase the speed with which you reach for him. Similarly, increase the vigor of the petting, patting, and scratching with each trial. The aim is for the puppy to associate a rapidly approaching hand with profuse praise and wonderful treats.



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Hugging — Many children will go up to a strange dog and give it a hug. This is often considered unwanted restraint to the dog so we must teach puppies that being hugged is not a threat. Hug the puppy and then give a treat. Do it many times before letting a child do it.

Feeding time

Some dogs aggressively guard their food, a behavior that is unacceptable and dangerous in the human household. You must teach your puppy that humans and food go together. Hang around with him when he is eating. Sit on the floor next to him and pet him and put your hands in his bowl. Hand feed him part of his meal so that he makes an association between your hand and receiving food, not having it taken away. Occasionally take the bowl away while he is eating and add a special treat. Walk up to the puppy while he is eating and drop in a special treat. Walk by the puppy while he is eating and "accidentally" bump into him. This work is very important to teach your puppy that he doesn't have to guard his food.

Other items

Dogs often guard other things like toys, bones, or tissues. The puppy must be taught that you can take anything away from him. To teach this, give your puppy a toy but hold onto the other end. Show him a treat and when he lets go of the item say "drop it" and give him the treat. Then let the puppy take possession of the item and do the same thing. Offer the treat, when he drops the item to get the treat, say "drop it" and give him the treat. Then pick the item up and give it back to him. By giving the toy back you let him know that it's not a bad thing to let go of his toy, he gets a treat and then gets the toy back. Repeat this exercise several times in a row with that item. Eventually you will be able to use the "drop it" as a command for the puppy to release the item. At this point you can start to fade out the treats and replace them with verbal praise. Repeat this over and over with as many items as you can.

Training

This is the best time to start training a puppy. Puppies learn so quickly. Using positive reinforcement, start teaching him to sit, down, and come. It is untrue that puppies can't learn these things until they are 6 months old.

"Say Please"

Once your puppy is sitting on command, make him sit before he gets anything in life - food, going out, attention, play - ANYTHING. Every member of the family should participate by requesting the puppy to sit before he gets anything. This simple exercise teaches the puppy that you control all the resources and that he must do something for you before he gets them. It is essentially teaching your puppy to say "please".

Punishment

NEVER physically punish your puppy. The only thing this teaches the puppy is to be afraid of you. In addition, you should NEVER even verbally punish the puppy unless you catch him in the act of doing the inappropriate behavior. Unless punishment comes within a few seconds of a behavior, the dog has no idea why he is being yelled at.

The key to a good dog is to praise the good things and ignore the bad. Don't let it be that the only time he gets your attention is when he does something bad. Teach your puppy what you want through positive reinforcement. Doing this will create a great dog and a wonderful bond.