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The 10 Most Important Things to Teach A Puppy

The cuteness of a young puppy is undeniable! In some instances, it can be quite hard to resist and a decision that could be taken too lightly. It's hardly a wonder then, that people find themselves at home with a baby pooch and all too often, don't know how to properly care for or raise him.

If you find yourself in this situation and feel pretty helpless, here are 10 tips that may help.....

1. Socialise Your Puppy to Many Situations

If you teach a young puppy nothing else, an important element is that the puppy feels that the world is a safe and happy place..... known as "socialisation". Take your puppy to lots of places, exposing him to different sights, smells, sounds, surfaces, humans and of course, other animals, always making sure that he's having a good time. Strive for a positive association with the world and the things he'll encounter in his doggy life. The critical element here is that your puppy has fun!

If you acquire the puppy at age 8-weeks, the window for primary socialisation is already half-closed... hopefully, his original home would have laid a good foundation. Taking him out, ensure that you can exercise some control over the environment not too busy and noisy. Of course, there's definitely no leaving your puppy alone in a hot car.

The moment that he seems fearful, immediately move away and let your puppy observe from a safe distance. High-value treats help with associating the experience with something good.

2. Prevent Separation Anxiety due to Leaving Your Puppy Alone

Dogs are social animals and in a world not controlled by humans, they'd spend most of their time in the company of other canines.... we see this in feral populations. In our world, many dogs are left alone for 8-10 hours, or even longer. This often results in separation and isolation anxiety (SA/IA) that can become severe.

To avoid inducing SA or IA, introduce your puppy to "aleness" gradually. Include crate or exercise-pen training during this process so he can be safely confined whilst you're away.

It's always a good idea to be at home for the first few days... play with him so that he's tired, then put him in the crate or pen with a food-stuffed Kong or other yummy chews.

Sit nearby.... reading or working on your computer. Slowly increase the distance and the time he's left alone until he is calm and relaxed on his own.

3. Housetrain Your Puppy to Relieve Himself in Designated Places and/or Times

Housetraining is always quite daunting.... the process of teaching your puppy to eliminate where you want him to go, is critically important. Whilst quite simple, the process is not always easy and requires ultra-management: you just don't give your puppy the opportunity to go to the bathroom anywhere other than the desired spot.

Leashes, tethers, crates, baby gates, exercise pens and an eagle-eye become the order of the day as your puppy learns that.... outdoors = bathroom. Of course, you may be using pee-pads or a litter box. The key is to take your puppy to his potty spot more often than he has to go, never forgetting to reinforce when he "does his business". To start, take him out every hour and then gradually increase the gaps.

It's also a good idea to encourage him to go on different surfaces to avoid the development of "substrate preferences".... this is to avoid anxiety when a particular surface is not available, if you're out with your puppy.

A little bit of play after he goes and you're sure he's done, will make it an outdoor adventure and he'll learn to "hold it" as long as possible to prolong the outside time or interaction with you. Once back inside, house freedom for around 15-20 minutes is a good idea, before putting him back under your supervision or confinement, until the next potty trip. As he comes to understand the concept, you can increase the length of time he can enjoy his post-potty freedom.

Keep in mind that additionally, not long after eating and after a strenuous play session, your puppy may need to go.

If there's an accident, give a cheerful "Oops, outside!" and escort him out to finish there. If you react angrily, you may teach him that it's not safe to go where you can see him and he'll try to hide to do his business.... you may find "poop and pee" behind the couch.

Punishing accidents may result in a dog who is reluctant to eliminate when on the leash, for fear of punishment.

4. Let Your Puppy Chew Only on Designated Chew Objects

Just as dogs develop substrate preferences, they also develop a liking for certain things to chew on. If you manage your puppy's environment (with tethers, leashes, baby gates, exercise pens and direct supervision) so he only has the opportunity to

chew on “legal” objects, you will be able to give him house freedom much sooner, with more confidence that valuables are safe.

Dogs like different kinds of chews so provide a wide variety until it's clear what he likes. The need to chew goes beyond puppyhood, so always have those chew objects handy throughout his life.

Some trainers recommend limited house freedom for the first year and then only for short periods to ensure that they can be trusted not to chew.

5. A Positive Training Foundation Means an Obedient Dog

Some 20-years ago when force-free training was a new concept, positive trainers were criticised for using treats.... however, bolstered by studies indicating that force-free training yields faster and more effective results, now there's no fear in being generous with food rewards.

Having a few treats on hand at all times, presents the opportunity to spontaneously reinforce good behaviour..... all living creatures tend to repeat behaviours that are reinforced. What is absolutely essential though, is that you don't find yourself reinforcing behaviours you don't want to see..... the "management" thing again! The idea is to get your puppy to figure out what he needs to do to get those treats!

6. Show Your Puppy It's Fun to Learn New Things

Today's skilled trainer knows that the whole training process must be fun for your puppy. Along with treats, incorporate happy voices, toys and play! Ensure that your trainer is on board with the force-free, fun approach to training. Your puppy should display joy when he realises it's training time.

7. Teach Your Puppy a Fast Recall

Coming when called may be the single, most important behaviour you teach your puppy. A dog with a solid recall understanding can be given more freedom to run and play in appropriate areas and it might save your puppy's life! Dogs who get to run and play are generally both physically and mentally healthier. They are able to burn off excess energy and this results in a tired, more relaxed dog.

Use a recall cue that always means "good stuff".... a chance to play with a favourite toy or a high-value treat. Never call your dog for something he does **not** love, like giving him a pill, cleaning his ears or putting him in his crate. Certainly, never call him to you for a scolding.

Unlike the old-style facing off and jerking of the leash, today's positive trainer teaches recall as another fun game to play. A good idea is the "run away, come" game.... call the dog and then run away so the dog gallops and romps after his human and gets to

party with treats and/or toys when he catches up. The dog learns that "come" is an irresistible invitation to play the chase game.

8. Help Your Dog Associate Human Touch with Love

Dogs have to endure quite a lot of human touching and they don't always like it, especially when it leads to being restrained. You can make life easier if you teach your puppy that human touch results in "good stuff". A new idea in the Veterinary world uses low-stress handling to minimise forced restraining. Minimising restraint is always the best policy.

Begin by pairing non-invasive touches with tasty treats; starting somewhere non-threatening (the side of his neck)... touch-treat, touch-treat, repeat. Look for the joy when you touch him and see his head swivel towards the treat. This is a "conditioned emotional response" (CER); he understands that the touch makes treats happen. You can move the touch to other parts that may be less comfortable for him..... ears, paws or under the chest/belly. Make sure you see the CER before proceeding any further. If he actively pulls away, you may need to back up and proceed more slowly.

This process is invaluable and will help enormously with grooming, nail clipping or treating injuries.

9. Condition Your Puppy to Enjoy Car Rides

When a dog doesn't travel well in cars, it limits our ability and willingness to take him places..... the distress involved is not pleasant for anyone. Fortunately, you can teach your puppy that the car is a space of awesomeness, resulting in joy at the anticipation of a car ride.

It can happen that the first car ride ever proves to be traumatic for the puppy..... just separated from his mother and siblings. The stress and unfamiliar movement could result in him being carsick. Bingo! Now the car is associated with stress and vomiting. You may ask the shelter or rescue group to withhold food for a few hours prior to picking up the puppy... this will reduce the likelihood of the puppy being carsick.

If there appears to be reluctance when you start taking your puppy out, just sit in the car with him without turning on the engine. Give him treats and play a few training games with him; make the car a fun place to be. It may need several sessions, but take your time. Then, turn on the engine and continue with the games without going anywhere. After that, enlist someone's help to move the car a short distance..... stop, let him out and do some fun stuff and then back in the car for another short distance. Gradually, extend the distances ensuring there's always the fun stuff at the end of the ride. Eventually, your "Want to go for a ride?" question will elicit joy! If your puppy continues to be carsick, a ginger snap or suitable medication will do the trick.

10. Reinforce Your Puppy's Trust

After socialisation, it's critical to teach and affirm your dog throughout his life.

Your obligation is to be your dog's advocate, not allowing anyone, no matter who they are, to do things to him that go against your gut instincts about how he should be treated. Your dog cannot speak for himself... he's counting on you to do it!

If you are committed to force-free, fear-free and pain-free handling and training, don't ever let anyone talk you into training him harshly. If your animal trainer does not comply with your aspirations, get another trainer!

Taken from an article by... *Author Pat Miller, CBCC-KA, CPDT-KA, is WDJ's Training Editor.*



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