

MAKING GOOD PUPPIES INTO GOOD DOGS

A new puppy is an exciting blank slate, eager to learn and eager to please. In order to be good pets, dogs must learn how to relate to people and their environment. Unless they are taught fundamentals as a puppy, they will not have the tools to behave normally as adults. Placing a highly social animal in the backyard and giving it minimal attention will result in a maladjusted, frustrated, and badly behaved dog. Ninety percent of canine behavior problems are related to boredom, Boredom and frustration result in destructive behaviors and vices, and these dogs will never make good pets until they are integrated into the family and made a part of your everyday activities. It is a great challenge to live with (let alone love) a dog that jumps on people, doesn't come when called, bites, or barks incessantly. Socialization is required for every puppy in order to teach it how to react to situations that it may encounter as an adult. In return for the time spent, you will have a valued member of the family that will provide years of devoted companionship. If you are unprepared to integrate your puppy into the family, it may be kinder to give it to a family that will.

THE NEW PUPPY

When puppies are first acquired, they are usually uncertain about their surroundings and will often whine and exhibit restlessness. Usually they are greatly comforted by having someone near. Stuffed animals can also provide comfort. At five to seven weeks of age, puppies are learning how to interact with each other and their mother, so the ideal age for acquiring a puppy is eight weeks of age. During the first few weeks after weaning, a puppy will come to recognize the family as their pack and learn the rules of behavior. The rules they learn in this critical period are the framework for their behavior the rest of their life. All reprimands must be given immediately following the infraction and must not be so severe that they undermine the relationship that you are trying to build. Keep in mind that a puppy doesn't automatically know the rules of the household, so some patience is in order.

A PUPPY FRIENDLY ENVIRONMENT

The kindest way to orient a puppy to the rules of the home is to structure it so that the puppy can't get into trouble easily. Inspect the home at puppy level. Secure electrical cords, sewing supplies, garbage, and valuables out of reach. Antifreeze and cleaning chemicals can be fatal if ingested. Many household plants can be poisonous if eaten. Initially the puppy should be restricted to a small area of the home where constant supervision is possible. Safe toys and dog chews should be available and plentiful. The chewing that will occur is a normal exploratory behavior. Your goal is to direct the chewing to appropriate objects, sparing the furniture and valuables. Frequent visits outdoors and praise at the time of urination and defecation outside will help teach the puppy the rules. Positive reinforcement is kinder and more effective than negative, and it reinforces the bond that you are trying to build with your puppy. Constant supervision indoor insures that when an infraction occurs, (urinating on the floor), a reprimand can be immediate (a loud sharp "NO") and an alternative can be given ("let's go outside!"). Crate training (confinement to a small kennel carrier when unsupervised) is a



humane and effective method of preserving a household until these lessons are completely learned. Confinement to a crate should never last more than a few hours for a puppy. The goal of the entire process is to structure the puppy's environment so that it cannot fail while it is learning the rules, and then gradually allowing more freedom as the puppy learns the boundaries of behavior expected.

DISCIPLINE

Negative reinforcement is only effective if it occurs seconds after the behavior. Dogs are expert in body language and usually a menacing loud NO is sufficient, perhaps accentuated with an authoritative hold over the bridge of the puppy's nose (a method often used by the mother dog.) Inflicting pain or delayed punishment is never appropriate and will undermine the puppy's trust of you. Some very sensitive dogs will quake at one harsh word, while others will require a physical reprimand to stop the behavior. One effective tool is an empty pop can filled with a few coins and vigorously shake or thrown to the floor. This will interrupt the behavior so that an appropriate one can be substituted (ie "Stop chewing on that chair and come get this ball"). A blast from a water bottle, if correctly done, will get a puppy's attention without linking you to the punishment. Care should be taken not to squirt the puppy in the eyes. Both of these methods, if correctly done, do not undermine a puppy's adoration of you.

PUPPY HANDLING

Puppies must be taught that they can be handled in any way that we see fit. This is vitally important for those breeds that need frequent grooming or have contact with children. Start by gently picking up a paw, then giving a reward. Rewards can be a small treat, a stroke, or a hearty "good dog." Gradually the handling should get more involved, but not enough to irritate the puppy, and constantly amid positive reinforcement. Teeth, ears, and paws should be thoroughly handled without objection. Trimming the dog's nails should be done very carefully so that the puppy isn't hurt when a nail is trimmed too short. The goal is not to achieve a short nail, but to teach the puppy to tolerate trimming. Puppies should even tolerate slightly painful stimuli and be amply rewarded for doing so. Children will inevitably deliver painful stimuli, so deprogramming a dog's initial defensive tendencies is critical to protecting children. Some breeds of dogs are very shy with strangers. It is critical that these pups are exposed to strangers as a puppy in nonthreatening situations. Have neighbors or friends visit. They should never lean over the dog or look directly at the pup if the pup seems threatened. The pup should be allowed to investigate the person on their own terms. Have the person slip them a treat, always being cautious that the pup never feels threatened. Gradually increase the contact as dictated by the puppy's comfort level. Forcing a puppy to accept someone when they are frightened will simply reinforce their terror. For some pups this may take considerable work, but it will be worth sparing them the stress of being terrified of most people they meet.

PUPPIES AND CHILDREN

Every interaction between puppies and children must be supervised. Puppies are similar to children in that they explore with their mouths, except those mouths are full of needle sharp

teeth. Both pups and children can hurt one another and need to be taught what is appropriate behavior. Puppies should never be allowed to place their mouths on human hands, even in play. Basic socialization should be completed with the puppy before the introduction. Constant positive reinforcement should be given during short supervised training sessions. It should be clear to the pup that wonderful things happen when the child is present and clear to the child that gentle handling is necessary. A few unpleasant experiences may negatively shape a dog's attitude toward children which it will have for the rest of its life. Until children are old enough to treat a dog gently, they should never be allowed unsupervised contact. Dogs and children are usually naturally playmates but rules need to be clear on both sides and some breeds of dogs should never be trusted with children.

OBEDIENCE TRAINING

Obedience training is recommended for every dog, regardless of size or purpose. Simply put, obedience training gives a dog manners. For safety a dog must be in control at all times and obedience training is the tool to do this. When a dog is sitting it cannot be jumping up on guests, running out into the street or chewing on the furniture. It also reinforces dominance of you over your dog. Dogs which dominate their owners are dangerous and have no place as household pets. The simple commands such as sit, stay, down, and come should be learned as a young puppy before formal training. Be prepared to enforce every command that you give so that a puppy takes you seriously. Teaching a puppy to come is easy when they are very young because they naturally want to be with you. As they mature, a treat or a toy can be the motivation to come and consistent hearty verbal praise is always in order. Make being next to you the most desirable place after calling a puppy to come. This may even entail running away to entice them to chase. Teaching a dog to sit involves placing a treat just above and behind their nose and firmly saying "SIT." As they reach for the treat, they naturally sit down. Sometimes gentle pressure over their hindquarters encourages them to sit. Your dog should know the basic commands before it starts an obedience class. There are many good obedience classes available, and they are absolutely vital so that your puppy not only behaves, but behaves when surrounded by distractions. It also provides opportunity for socialization to other dogs. It is essential that puppies have completed a full set of vaccinations before attending these classes.

GOOD DOGS

Each dog is only as good as the owner that trains it. Making your dog a companion during your every day activities is essential for making a well-adjusted member of the dog community. When every car ride ends at the groomer or the veterinarian, it is not surprising that some dogs hate the car. Try taking the dog to the grocery store (weather permitting) and stopping at the park along the way. Use your dog as an excuse to get outside, stretch your legs, and meet your neighbors. Just watching a dog enthusiastically pursue a ball or perfect their form while catching a frisbee is enough to make anyone smile. Supply your dog with regular exercise, discipline, and consistent inclusion in your everyday activities, and you WILL have a good dog that will in turn give you constant devotion and companionship of the most excellent variety.