

Socializing Your Puppy



Everyone would love to have the perfect "Lassie" dog -- one that obeys commands, walks perfectly by your side on a leash, and minds his manners in a crowd. "Boy, I wish my dog were like that", they say! It is easy to forget that "TV Dogs" have had years of training with professional handlers. The good news is you don't need to hire a professional or send your dog to Hollywood to have a great dog. What you do need to do is dedicate some time and energy to training your dog so he will be obedient and understand what you want him to do.

It is NEVER Too Early to Start

People are often under the impression that a dog cannot be trained until it is six months or older. Nothing can be farther from the truth! It is never too early to start training your new puppy. As soon as a pup opens his eyes his education begins. At this stage it is very important for a young dog to be socialized. He learns how to play and act around other dogs from his mother and littermates. He learns how to act around humans from the contact he has with them. Studies have shown that pups who are isolated at the critical 7 to 10 week stage tend to be more fearful and have a harder time making a dog-human bond. They can still make fine pets, but they will not achieve their optimum. Once the pup leaves his mother and littermates and moves to your home, you become his teacher, introducing him to the world.

Socialization

One of the best things you can do for your dog is to properly socialize him when he is a pup. It is crucial that you do this when he is young - there is a definite window of opportunity to optimum socialization. Start out gradually, being careful not to overwhelm or over tire your pup. Introduce him to the members of his family. Get him accustomed to all the noises and obstacles in your house. Let him stay in the room while you vacuum and encourage him to walk up and down the stairs. Your house may seem dull to you, but to your pup it is a jungle of new smells, sights and sounds! You can make up games to use during your training -- be creative! For example, spread a small tarp on the floor and put your pup in the middle with you on one side coaxing him toward you. Often, the new texture will make the pup hesitate, but he will soon overcome his fear with gentle coaxing. Be generous with your praise! If you have access to any children's toys, these can be great fun in socializing. You can coax your pup to walk through a tunnel, tent or down a small slide. You can encourage your dog to solve puzzles by placing his favorite treat under a towel and helping him find it! If the pup seems very timid, be sure not to go too fast. Introduce new objects slowly, once he gets use to the old ones.

As he gets a bit older and after he has had his puppy shots, then you can move your exercise outdoors into the neighborhood. With a leash and a puppy collar (with an ID tag on it, of course), you can walk him around the yard, through the sand box, down the street, past the fire hydrant, etc. The idea is to get him used to all the sights and sounds he might encounter on a walk. This will help him to become a calm dog in all situations and help him not to be distracted by the world around him when he is supposed to be minding you.

Keep your lessons short and be consistent. A puppy has a very short attention span and if you try to train too long you will end up getting frustrated and have an unhappy puppy. Sessions should be 10 to 15 minutes, perhaps twice a day. Keep the time fun and upbeat. Be consistent in your training. Use the same commands over and over again - you don't want to confuse him by using different commands. Your dog should love his time training with you, not run for cover. Use positive reinforcement and be generous with your praise. Your kind words will go much farther than your scolding.

Don't Give in to Fear

As tempting as it might be, try not to coddle your pup when you are socializing. Dogs are very intuitive and can read even the slightest clues and body language from their owners. If you approach a situation expecting your puppy to be afraid and then pick him up and cuddle him when he is, you have taught him a fear response - the opposite of your intention. For example, let's say that you are walking down the street with your pup and a bicyclist is approaching. You assume he will be scared so you start bending down, reach for him, pick him up, pet him and cooingly tell him everything is going to be ok. You think you have helped him to not be afraid of bikes, but in fact he is now thinking, "My goodness, that thing made Mom act so upset - it must be awful!" You will need to approach situations confidently so that your puppy will be confident. If he does act frightened, calmly pat him and reassure him, but do not pick him up. Let him face the situation.

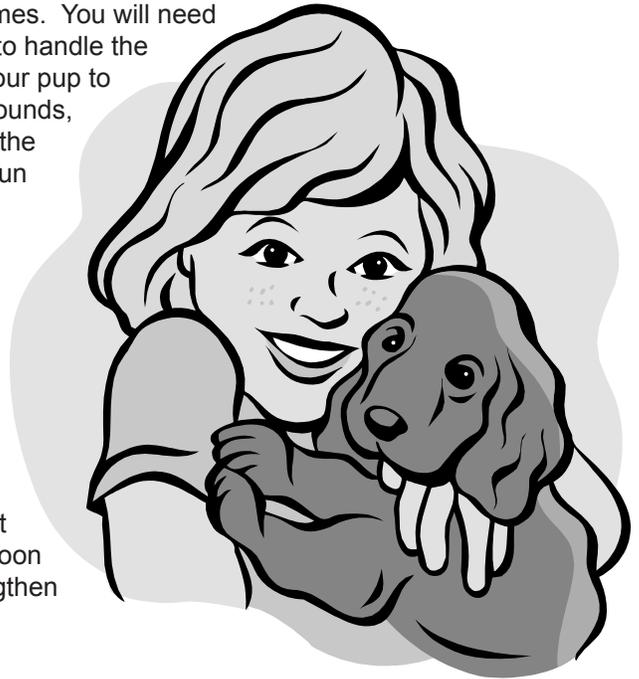
Children

It is very important to expose your dog to children, whether you have them or not. There will always be children in the neighborhood, riding bikes or skateboards or just playing in their yards. Children move and act differently than adults and a dog that has not been exposed to them may not react properly. If you have children, the task is an easy one. The puppy and child will automatically be together.

You will need to make sure that you supervise them at all times. You will need to teach the children how to react around animals and how to handle the puppy. If you do not have children, you should try to take your pup to places where he can be around them. For example, playgrounds, parks or homes of friends that have children work well. Let the puppy get used to the noises and actions of kids and have fun with them in a supervised setting.

Kindergarten

Believe it or not, almost all dog training clubs offer "puppy kindergarten" classes. These classes are excellent places to start your puppy's training. Not only can he start to learn basic obedience, but the class is also a great place to socialize him. The classes incorporate play time with training and are a great way to start your pup on the road to being a well-behaved dog. Ask your vet, shelter, or local pet store to recommend a training class and start your dog as soon as you can. As an added bonus, the training will help strengthen your bond with your puppy.



Treat Him Like a Dog

Yes, he is the cutest thing you have ever seen, with a fuzzy face and eyes that make you melt. However, do not give into temptation and let this little charmer rule you! Whatever he is doing, you must stop and think "Will this still be cute when he is a full-grown dog?" It is pretty harmless having a tiny pup jump up on you, but will it still be harmless when he is 100+ pounds? So your pup likes to chew on your hand when he plays, but will that be ok when he can swallow your hand? If you don't want your full-grown dog on the couch, then don't let him up there when he is a puppy. It might make you laugh now if he growls to protect his food, but you won't be laughing about it when he is full-grown.

Yes, this is a lot to think about! Getting a puppy is a BIG responsibility! You can still have fun with your puppy while setting boundaries for his behavior. It is much easier to teach it right the first time then to have to correct bad habits later on. All of your time, patience, and hard work now will pay off for years to come and you will have a trustworthy, well-mannered companion. Soon you will hear people passing you by saying, "Boy I wish my dog were like that!"



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