

Texas Veterinary Behavior Services

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EARLY TRAINING FOR YOUNG PUPPIES

Puppies begin learning long before you bring them to their new home. They continue to learn every day from every interaction with you and their environment whether you specifically train them or not. Considering this, it becomes apparent how important it is to provide suitable structure and training from the start to prevent your new puppy from learning the wrong lessons. Many behaviors exhibited by puppies are cute and relatively harmless, but these same behaviors exhibited by an adult dog could be dangerous. Puppies do not "grow out" of poor behavior. Behaviors that puppies exhibit when they are young will typically persist unless you teach the dog a more acceptable alternative.

Kindergarten Puppy Training classes (often called KPT) and puppy socialization parties can be a good way to get your puppy started. These classes are available in many communities and typically enroll puppies beginning at 8-10 weeks of age. Do not wait until 6 months of age to begin training your puppy. By 6 months of age, your puppy has had 3-4 months to develop undesirable habits that must be corrected before good behavior will be established.

Puppies, like young children, do have short attention spans, so training sessions must be short. Short sessions (1-5 minutes) spread frequently throughout the day are more productive than one or two longer sessions. These training sessions should be incorporated into your daily routine and made fun for the puppy. Your puppy should not be able to distinguish "real life" from training.

SOCIALIZATION

Socialization is a critical process in all animals. It helps your puppy develop coping skills and learn to properly interact with animals of its own and other species (including humans). Puppies with inadequate socialization are fearful of novel people and situations and do not handle stress well. You should not wait until your puppy's vaccination series is completely finished before starting socialization and training. The peak socialization window closes between 12-14 weeks of age and most vaccination series are not completed until after the puppy is 16 weeks of age. By this time, your puppy will have missed out on crucial social lessons that could impair the puppy's behavior for life. Just be prudent in where you take your puppy.

LEADERSHIP

All young animals of social species need guidance to help them learn acceptable behavior. When a puppy is incorporated into a human family, the human members should establish leadership over the puppy. It is extremely important that you provide consistent

and effective leadership and guidance. Puppies whose lives have no structure frequently develop a wide variety of behavior problems particularly unruliness and aggression. Leadership does not mean you must physically dominate your puppy, nor does it involve instilling fear in your puppy. Leadership involves setting rules and controlling your puppy's access to its rewards. Your puppy should learn at least 3 basic cue responses (sit, down, and come), and it should behave appropriately before receiving any form of reward (food, toys, walks, games, petting, or attention). Always reward behaviors you find appropriate and desirable, and prevent (rather than punish) behaviors that are not acceptable.

MOUthing/BITING/CHEWING

Puppies explore with their mouths, and learn to temper jaw strength by playing with other puppies. When puppies play roughly and bite each other too hard, they will yelp and withdrawal from the game at least temporarily. If your puppy mouths or applies pressure with its teeth, immediately cease the game. It even may be necessary to get up and walk away. After the puppy calms down, the game can resume, but if the puppy begins to mouth roughly again the game should cease completely. Puppies should not be encouraged to play with your hands, but should be encouraged to play with toys instead. Never physically punish your puppy for biting. Mouthing and biting are normal behaviors, and punishment may escalate the biting into true aggression or make the puppy fearful.

Puppies also are not born knowing on what it is acceptable for them to chew, nor do they care which items are labeled dog toys and which are not. It is your job to help teach the puppy what items are appropriate to chew. Supervision is critical in establishing proper chewing behavior. If you do not watch the puppy, you will not be able to structure its activity. Encourage the puppy to chew on its own toys by playing with them with the puppy. If the puppy is found chewing on an unacceptable item, make a sharp noise or otherwise distract the puppy, and then give it an appropriate toy. Items on which you do not want the puppy to chew should be kept out of the puppy's reach.

RESTRAINT/HANDLING

All puppies need to learn restraint and self-control. Every puppy and dog will need to be handled at some point in its life by you and other people. Puppies should learn to accept handling and manipulation without fear.

You should begin handling your puppy from the day you bring it home. Provide gentle restraint with lots of positive reward, including food treats, when the puppy is handled and behaving appropriately. Gently handle and examine your puppy's ears, feet, mouth, eyes and other body parts on a daily basis. Hold the puppy by the collar and encourage the puppy to remain still. Praise, petting, and food rewards should be used to reinforce good behavior. This should become part of your pet's life. Some puppies are very fearful of being restrained and these puppies need to be handled carefully so you do not increase their fear. Puppies should NOT be physically punished for resisting restraint. This will make fearful puppies more afraid and aggressive puppies more aggressive. If your puppy is fearful or aggressive when handled, seek help from your veterinarian or trainer.

FOOD/POSSESSIONS

Aggression around food and possessions can be a dangerous problem. In addition, it may be an indication of further aggressive threats toward the owner in the future. Puppies should learn to accept having people around their food and possessions. This is best taught early in life. Puppies may be allowed to defend their possessions from other animals, but this behavior is unacceptable and dangerous when directed at people, particularly if children are in the household. Begin by making a game of adding tasty treats to your puppy's food bowl while it is eating. These treats should be something the puppy likes as well as or better than its food. The goal is to imprint the puppy with the idea that approaching people and hands bring good things. Further steps can involve picking up the puppy's bowl, adding something tasty, and immediately giving the bowl back to the puppy.

Similar steps can be taken with the puppy's toys. Save one or two very special toys with which the puppy likes to play, allowing the puppy access to them only when you are actively playing with the puppy. These toys should become associated with you. In addition, you can periodically approach and offer the puppy a food reward while it is playing with one of its toys. This serves two purposes. It reinforces the puppy for playing with that toy, and it teaches the puppy to look forward to people approaching it. Another exercise involves removing the toy with which the puppy is playing, smearing something good on it (e.g. peanut butter or cheese) and giving it back to the puppy.

If your puppy is already showing aggression in any of these situations, seek help from your veterinarian immediately.