

PUPPY: TRAINING BASICS

At what age can I start training my new puppy?

You will be training your puppy from the moment you pick it up. Puppies learn as soon as they are born. Many good breeders encourage handling and socialisation from birth. Some training can begin as soon as the puppy can open its eyes and walk. Young puppies have short attention spans but expect them to begin to learn simple obedience commands such as 'sit', 'down' and 'stay', from as early as 7 to 8 weeks of age.

Traditionally, formal dog training is often delayed until 6 months of age. Actually this juvenile stage is a very poor time to start. The dog is beginning to consolidate adult behavioural patterns, dominance behaviour is beginning to emerge, and strategies which have been successful since puppyhood will be harder to change.

When training is started at 7 to 8 weeks use methods that rely on positive reinforcement and kindness. Puppies have short attention spans, so training sessions should be brief, but frequent (several times a day). Puppies can be taught to sit, down, and stand using a method called food-lure training. We use food treats to entice the dog to follow its nose into the proper positions for sit, down, stand, and stay.

How do I get started using food lure training?

Small pieces of food or a favoured toy can be used to encourage your puppy to perform most tasks. Provided the reward is sufficiently appealing, the puppy can be prompted towards the desired response giving the command as you show the puppy the reward, and move it so as to get the desired response. For example, food held up over the puppy's nose and moved slowly backwards and slightly downwards should get a sit response. Food drawn down to the floor and slightly forward should get a down response. Food brought back up and slightly forward should get a stand response. Food held out at a distance should get a come response. Food that is held at your side at the height of the puppy's nose as you walk should get it to heel or follow. By pairing a command phrase or word with each action, and giving the reward for each appropriate response, the puppy should soon learn the meaning of each command.

How often should I give the command?

Ideally you should give the command phrase once and then use your food to move the puppy into positions. Once the puppy has performed the task, give verbal praise and an affectionate pat which will act as secondary reinforcers (see below). Some trainers also use clickers as secondary reinforcers. If you keep repeating the command, the puppy will learn that several repetitions are acceptable before it needs to obey. Keeping a lead attached can help to gain an immediate response if the puppy does not obey, but it is preferable to lure the right response without touching the puppy.

Remember: in the early stages of training your puppy does not know the meaning of the word. Therefore you could just as easily teach your puppy to sit with the word "bananas", as you could with the word "sit". The key is to associate the word, in this case "sit", with the action of placing the hind end on the floor.

How should I phase out the lure and food rewards?

At first you are going to let the puppy see the food in your hand so that you will have its attention and can use it to guide the response. As your puppy begins to comply more regularly and readily, you can start to hide the food in your hand, but give the command and repeat the motion or signal that has been used to date. Soon you should give the signal and command without any food reward but only praise and affection. Next, you can begin to vary the frequency, giving the "good dog" and perhaps patting each time, but giving the food randomly, perhaps every 3 or 4 times. In time, the puppy should respond to either the hand signal or simple command.

Over time, the words "good dog" or the affectionate pat become secondary reinforcers. Because they have been paired with food in the past, they become a reinforcement in themselves. It is important to use secondary reinforcement because you will not always have food with you when you need your pet to obey. In addition, if you rely on food to get your puppy to comply, you will have a puppy that will only do the task when you have a treat.

At first training may begin in designated sessions throughout the day, with a variety of family members. All rewards should be saved for these training sessions. Over time however, you should begin to ask your puppy to perform the tasks at other times.

How much time should I spend training my puppy every day?

You do not necessarily need to train in a set session daily. Rather, integrate these tasks throughout the day. A goal to strive for is at least 15 minutes of training every day. These can be short 5 minute sessions spread throughout the day. Try to have all family members ask your puppy to do the required tasks. Remember to try and train in every room of your house. You want your puppy to sit, lie down and stay everywhere, not just in the training location.

Use these training tasks as you integrate the puppy into your life. For example, ask your puppy to sit prior to receiving food, sit before you let it in or out the door, and sit before you pet it. These are times when your puppy wants something and is more likely to comply. In this way you are training your dog all the time, throughout the day and also establishing yourself as the controller. Training your puppy prior to getting each reward also helps to prevent problems. Having your puppy sit before getting a food or treat prevents begging, while teaching your dog to sit before opening the door can prevent jumping up or running out the door.

Be creative. The time you spend training your puppy now, will pay off when you have an adult dog. To have a well-trained dog, you need to be committed to reinforcing the training tasks on a frequent basis. The more you teach and supervise your puppy, the less opportunity it will have to engage in improper behaviours. Dogs do not train themselves, when left to choose their behaviour they will act like dogs.

What can be done if my puppy is too distracted or excitable to control?

Training should begin in a quiet environment with few distractions. The reward chosen should be highly motivating so that the puppy is focused entirely on the trainer and the reward. Although a small food treat generally works best, a favourite toy might work just as well. It might also be helpful to train the puppy just before a scheduled mealtime when it is at its most hungry. For difficult puppies or headstrong puppies the best way to ensure that the puppy will perform the desired behaviour and respond appropriately to the command is to leave a lead attached and to use a head collar for additional control.

Pet owners who are novices at training can begin a training programme with these few simple steps. It takes repetition, time and perseverance for the puppy to be able to predictably and reliably respond to commands in a variety of situations. The training class serves many functions. Of course trainers can demonstrate techniques and help guide you through the steps in training. They can help advise you on puppy training problems, and can help you advance your training to more difficult exercises. The puppy will also be learning in a group situation, with some real life distractions. Also the pet owner who takes his or her dog to a puppy class, will be more likely to practice (do their homework) throughout the week, if they do not want to fall behind by the next class. A training class is a good place to meet and talk to other new puppy owners and see how all puppies behave.

Training classes for young puppies are also an excellent way to socialise your new puppy to a variety of people, other dogs, and stimuli, in a controlled environment. In addition, you will learn how to prevent problems before they can begin, or deal with them as they emerge, rather than having to find a way to correct problems that have already developed. Your puppy might also make some new friends of the same age. You could then visit these friends (or vice versa) with your puppy for social play and exercise sessions. Since the main socialisation period for dogs ends by 3 months of age, puppy socialisation classes are most valuable for puppies between 8 weeks and this age. If all puppies in the class have had initial vaccinations, are healthy and parasite free, the health risks are low and the potential benefits are enormous. Discuss when to start and the location of classes in your area with your veterinary surgeon.