



Puppy Kindergarten

The Human End of the Leash

Bringing a puppy home is an exciting adventure for everyone, including the puppy. There are many decisions to be made—several having to do with how a family will teach their puppy to behave appropriately in both canine and human society. In the process of training a puppy there are a number of “human behaviors” to keep in mind while training puppies.

Consistency

The puppy’s training will be more effective if the family’s expectations are consistent. For example, a puppy will not learn to stay off the furniture if it is occasionally allowed. A family should decide what is acceptable behavior and follow through consistently. In other words, every time the puppy gets on the furniture, it is given the designated command, like “on the floor” or “no furniture.” And, yes, puppies can learn to be selective. If you want to allow them to be on the couch next to you but not on grandma’s special chair, they can learn that. The only thing they need is consistency in your response.

Communication

Canine body language is a puppy’s “first language,” but puppies learn quickly to watch and interpret human facial expressions, posture, and hand movements. Puppies also respond to differences in tone of voice, cadence, and a rising or falling inflection. For example, a sound such as “uh-uh” spoken firmly when the puppy is engaging in unwanted behavior may effectively interrupt the behavior, allowing you to cue and reward an alternate acceptable behavior.



Language

Our spoken language is the puppy's "second language." While no dog will ever become fluent in our spoken language, puppies are capable of learning the meaning of relevant sounds (words) through repetition and association. Decide which words will be used in training the puppy and choose a different word for each desired behavior. For example, a puppy will be confused if it is told "down" to mean both "no jumping up on people" and "lie down on the floor." Instead, the family could use "down" to mean "lie down" and "off" to discourage jumping up. If several family members are involved in training, a reference list of which word to use for each desired behavior might help.

According to communication experts, "While most of our focus is on words, communication is predominantly transmitted by other channels, such as voice tone and gestures." For your puppy, the meaning of your body language surpasses your words every time.

Clarity



Break training goals down into small, clear steps that the puppy is capable of understanding and physically accomplishing. For example, to teach a puppy to "sit," hold a treat just above the puppy's head and in front of its nose. Raise the treat upward over the top of its head until the puppy is in the "sit" position. As the puppy masters the "sit" command, you can gradually move into the "stay" command, extending the number of seconds the puppy stays in position before getting the treat.

Reward even the tiniest progress toward the training goal! Keep training sessions short, focusing on a single training step or skill for just a few repetitions, and always end on a positive note.

Patience

Puppy training can sometimes feel like "two steps forward, one step back." Accept that fact, be patient with your puppy, and be prepared to try a different approach or to start over from square one when things regress. Regression often precedes a big step forward when the puppy's understanding suddenly "clicks."



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