

YOUR PUPPY AND YOU

A guide to 5 common behaviour/training problems and what you can do about them



For anyone who has a new puppy, this practical guide will provide you with essential information on how to build a bond with your puppy and ensure he grows into a happy, confident, well-socialised dog.

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So, you have fallen in love and after months of choosing the right puppy for you and your family, its time to bring him home. This is usually at 8 weeks and he should have already been encouraged to experience many different things, such as, children, washing machines, vacume cleaners, people, other dogs and various household sounds.

However, it shouldn't end there – the responsibility has now been passed to you as parent of your new puppy. It is now down to you to ensure that your puppy gets socialised – and quickly. The myth of “he's still only a puppy” said with love and affection, when a dog is within its first year and currently vandalising your living room, is merely an excuse about bad behaviour. Not many people realise that by 8 months old, the brain has formed into that of an adult and in fact, isn't a puppy “brain” anymore.

Our rush to assume that a dog has an instinct of right and wrong, a conscience and an understanding of what we say, is an unfair expectation. If you have not trained the puppy to understand what you are saying, how does he definitely know what to do? If you have not socialised your puppy from the moment you bring him home for those first few short weeks, until the socialisation window closes (approx 16 weeks) have you really done enough for him to feel confident around things that he has never seen or heard before? If a puppy is not socialised to new experiences and stimulus, he will be afraid and the fearful dog is the one that may end up showing signs of aggression.

Socialisation is a process in which a puppy learns to relate to people and children, should enable it to have pleasant encounters with other puppies as it is vitally important for your puppy to meet and interact with other puppies and dogs as they learn vital communication skills that they will then use throughout their lives when meeting other dogs.

Our world can be a scary place to a small dog and through socialisation you help your puppy deal with people, traffic, other dogs, aerosol sprays, umbrellas, bikes, joggers – in fact there truly is no limit to socialisation.

Make yourself a plan, taking into account your lifestyle and introduce your puppy to as many people, places and situations you can manage. Do you live in the country? Take him to a town. If you live in a town, take him to the country where he can see livestock and birds. It is not enough for him to meet one man with a beard, one dog or one child. Repeated exposure will pay dividends later in his life as an adult. Gladly, there is a growing understanding and interest in socialisation and you can either enrol on one of the many new “puppy socialisation” classes that are available, contact a behaviourist who will tailor make a socialisation plan for you or try and develop one yourself.

Remember to start the socialisation immediately when the puppy joins your family and include:

- People with different clothing
- Hats / crash helmets
- Babies and baby buggies
- Cycles
- Skateboards
- The vets
- Traffic – buses, cars – travelling in the car
- Shopping Centres
- Countryside
- Walking sticks, umbrellas
- Aerosol cans, vacume cleaners

Even before he has been immunised, you can carry the puppy around in your coat so that he can see and hear vital new things.

Take him on the bus, take him on a train, take him everywhere with you – it is a well known fact that if you take your puppy everywhere with you and train him with basic commands, he will fit into any situation and will not have to be “left at home” because his behaviour will only serve to embarrass you or let you down if he comes with you. Dogs love to be around you and live relatively short lives, let’s make sure the lives they do have are happy, stimulating and part of the family. No dog wants to be shut away in a small room merely because he has not been trained properly – whose fault is that?

It’s all very well socialising the puppy but what about training him – I have to have eyes in the back of my head, I hear you cry!

It’s important to decide early on, just what is acceptable behaviour for you. As I mentioned earlier, a puppy “brain” as young as eight weeks old is very similar to that of an adult due to his ability to be able to learn – surprising isn’t it? So when your puppy joins you at the age of 8 weeks, gentle training of those essential basics can start immediately. Every dog should be trained in recall, sit and wait. The recall is the most vital as you may need to get your dog back to you in a dangerous situation, i.e. by a road or farm machinery so effective teaching of those basic cues should always be applied.

For many years now, owners and dog lovers have tried to work along the lines of the wolf pack structure in order to come up with basic rules (setting the boundaries). The word alpha of the pack and showing your dog whose boss was all common place and everyone was happy! However, more recently research in the late 1990s proves that although our dogs are indeed descendants of the wolf, through natural selection and breeding the dogs have evolved and do not truly understand the “pack rules” how can they – they don’t live with a wolf pack! Therefore, by acting as the “pack leader” will only serve to confuse your dog and possibly break the communication bond you have with him because you have become too assertive and aggressive with him.

There is absolutely NO NEED for showing aggression to your dog, I prefer to forget this “leader of the pack” statement and work more on the “parenting” of a puppy and dog. The parallels between child psychology and canine psychology are amazing.

Many sad dog destinies and many problems have come out of that myth and it is just not the way it works. Now day’s people tend to use reward training and positive reinforcement to “show” the dog he has done right – by immediately rewarding and using praise – this is far more affective. We humans simply cannot give the facial, body, tail and sound signals that would communicate effectively with the wolf or dog – therefore we simply cannot be “alpha” of the pack.

So, choose the boundaries you want to set for your puppy, teach them and be consistent. He will quickly learn what is and is not acceptable. Interaction of a positive nature will build a wonderful relationship between you and if you don’t want him on the sofa – do not let him remain on the sofa! If you don’t mind him on the sofa – teach him a cue that will enable him to understand that getting off of the sofa can be rewarding too – when he complies, reward him – create the harmony.

If you teach him that food always comes in his bowl and never from your plate or from the table – he is unlikely to pester you for food. If someone gives him food from their plate – this will undo all of your hard work and he is likely to pester because it worked before so let’s try it again!

Remember why you go to work for – it isn’t because you love it (well some people do) it’s because you get rewarded at the end of the week or the month – it isn’t really any different for your dog – they are wonderfully selfish and are mainly interested in “what’s in it for them” it doesn’t mean they are trying to take over the world or your household.

So now let’s look at some common behaviour problems and what you can do about them

House Training

The secret to house training is to spend two or three days watching your puppy. This is a very easy thing to teach if you prevent any accidents from happening in the first place or if they do happen – you are there to catch them in the act. NEVER punish a puppy or dog once the event has occurred – it's simply too late. He does not understand that your best carpet is not for peeing on, it's absorbent to him so why not pee on it?

Over the period of the first few days, take your puppy out into the garden every hour. Take him to the place you want him to go and stay with him until he obliges. He may wander about and sniff but keep them peed and be patient. Do not leave him to his own devices, he may not go and then come back in and wet the carpet. Watch him and as soon as he is going, praise him tremendously and give him a food reward. Think of food in a dog's world like we seem to think of money in a human's world. You can take their normal ration of dried food and use them as rewards whilst you are training instead of just in his bowl.

Take him out every hour for the first few days and at least when he has just woken up and after he has been fed. During the night it is worth popping the puppy in his crate by your bed or in a cardboard box (dogs rarely eliminate in their living area) and wake him up (or wake yourself up when he begins to stir) and take him out at regular intervals – maximum of 2 hours. You should not expect your puppy to hold onto his toilet for longer than two hours because his bladder is considerably small at this age and although the prospect of getting up 4 times during the cold, dark night doesn't sound appealing – it is worth doing because it really does work. Through repeated association with limited or no accidents in the house, it will only take a matter of days for your puppy to work out where he is supposed to eliminate. You can also associate a word to the action and when you see your puppy begin to empty, say the word and finish with praise and a treat. This can be helpful if you are in a hurry and want them to be quick.

Pulling on the lead/Early lead training

Most puppies will pull when you first take them out for a walk. This is rather normal behaviour. He is very likely to be excited at the prospect of going out so he pulls you to get there quicker. This is all very acceptable for small puppies and the nightmare only becomes apparent when a puppy grows into a rather large adult and drags you down the road. They also pull because we follow! If we stop and don't follow or for instance turn and walk in another direction, they will learn that pulling doesn't get them to where they want to go!

Arm yourself with a pocket full of treats to make yourself interesting, remember you want the puppy to target you. You can try in the garden first of all. Place the lead on and take a few steps, if he pulls, stop, say nothing and give no reward, as soon as the lead goes loose start taking a few steps forward again and praise and reward every few steps. This will make you interesting and a pleasure to walk with for your puppy. After a few days in the garden progress to your normal walk. While on this walk you only move forward if the lead is loose, as soon as he pulls, stop immediately and don't say anything, as soon as the lead goes loose again, move forward, whilst praising and rewarding if his lead is still loose. This may result in your normal walk taking twice as long and some funny looks from passers by but every time the puppy pulls, stop and even call him over to you so that all his pulling is doing is making him go backwards. Over a period of time he should display a gradual reduction in pulling but you do have to stick with it and be very patient. Usually extra sessions in the garden too can help the puppy make the association.

If he is still pulling after several months old, contact a trainer who can give you further advice to prevent lead pulling.

Stealing Things!

Puppies/dogs just can't help being opportunists, if it's edible, quick eat it now (survival) and if he gets attention by stealing socks or a tea towel then, hey yippee, let's do it again, what a great game and a great way of getting YOUR attention.

With puppies it's rather easier to prevent this habit forming in the first place and easy to ensure it doesn't continue. If your puppy jumps up and grabs the tea towel or steals a shoe or sock your natural reaction is to chase after him shouting "stop". This, in turn becomes a bit of a game for your puppy, he has got your attention and now you are chasing him, what fun. So sometimes it's best to sacrifice the tea towel and the shoe and do nothing at all. Simply ignore what the puppy is doing and do not chase him.

If in the meantime the puppy is having a right old shake of the item, go and obtain a rather tasty treat such as a bit of cheese or ham and call him over to you in an excited tone. You can show him the treat at this stage, squat down holding it out to him whilst calling him. When he starts approaching he will have to drop the item to take the treat at which stage you quietly pick up the item. If he has already dropped it, give him the treat and take the item away and remove from sight.

Remember sacrifice goes a long way – chasing behind him trying to retrieve the stolen item doesn't!

Food Bowl Training

Another natural behaviour that is very common and hugely irritating for owners is guarding the food bowl. This is another survival instinct and no dog will willingly share his vital food source with another dog so we must accept that and do all we can to ensure your puppy grows up knowing that having people around when he is eating or near his food bowl is actually very beneficial.

Firstly teach him to sit down and wait a few seconds before you put food down and give him the cue to eat. All you have to do is hold the bowl above his head and move it slightly backwards, he will automatically sit down. You can then tell him to wait while you pop his bowl down. Once you have put the bowl down, sit down on the floor by him whilst he is eating. Keep your hands near to the bowl or into the bowl whilst verbally praising him as you do so. You should also throw in something nice as he is eating so your presence means he gets a tasty extra.

Encourage all of the family members to do this and begin this as soon as you bring your puppy home. Reduce his normal ration and add extra amounts in whilst he is eating and this teaches him that we don't take the food away. Once the food is placed on the floor DO NOT take it away again even if the puppy is growling, this will only serve to make him more anxious to guard. By adding extra, tasty treats we are teaching him that people around bring extra food, they do not take it away thus having them around is no reason to feel threatened and guard the food bowl.

Play Biting

Puppies will naturally "play bite" with their littermates and generally they soon tell each other when they are biting too hard. This play with each other teaches them valuable lessons in all sorts of behaviour such as mouthing, eye stalking and general social interaction and play. If one puppy nips another too hard, he will let out a yelp/cry and sometimes get shunned by his litter mates for playing too rough. This results in them learning how hard they can bite before they hear the yelp and it's no different with us.

The best method here is to let out a loud cry or shriek when you are playing with your puppy and he bites you too hard (which isn't hard when they have teeth like needles). He needs to learn that our skin is very tender too so don't be frightened to let out a shriek if the teeth so much as brush the skin, let alone leave an indentation in your skin. Usually a shriek is enough to stop the puppy in his tracks. You can then turn away folding your hand or arms. He may stop completely at this stage but sometimes shrieking can cause them to get even more excited and this is when ignoring the puppy again helps greatly.

If he continues to jump up or bite you, totally ignore him, fold your arms so he can't get at them and look the other way without saying anything. If he calms down, praise and carry on playing again. If he does it again, repeat the process. If he continues to bite, pop him into another room for 30 seconds and then let him in again, greeting him pleasantly. He should make the connection that when he bites, the game ends.

So now you have a few ideas on how to deal effectively with 5 common behaviour problems.....what else should you be thinking about?

HOW DO THEY WORK?

Think about an average day with your dog, you get up in the morning, with that Monday morning feeling and tell the dog off with a bit of annoyance in your voice. He turns his face sideways to you and licks his nose in one quick movement. You wash, finish getting ready and go to the door. The dog is happy to know that he is going out for a walk and fawns around you. You command him to "SIT"! The commanding tone makes your dog yawn before he sits down. You put on his leash, go out of the door and he pulls a little. You jerk him back, he then turns his back on you and puts his nose to the ground.

At the park you let him loose for a few minutes and before long your wrist watch tells you that its time to go back. You call your dog. Was your voice a little stressed? Your dog starts moving towards you slowly and in a curve. You think he does this to annoy you and you yell at him. He sniffs the ground, curves even more and looks away from you. He finally comes and you scold him or even worse, you shake him. He turns his face from you, licking his nose or yawning.

This was only one mornings procedure, if this goes on throughout the day or he has insufficient exercise and is continually abused he will use a series of signals to try and calm you down. Dogs use signals as soon as they feel stressed or threatened and if they are "awake", they talk, just like you and I. (Turid Rugaas - On talking terms with dogs)

Try to have patience with your dog and provide adequate exercise and mental stimulation as this will prevent behaviour problems from developing.



Doggy Tips – A definite two paws up!

You need to exert owner dominance over your dog

NO - Wolf-Pack behaviour is not genetic – wolf cubs learn this 'Alpha' communication during their critical socialisation period. Therefore, dogs do not have these genes passed down and experience totally different socialisation experiences (with humans and not wolves) so are unable to understand why we don't feed them first, go through doors first or exert dominance over them to show them who is the boss (you do not need a firm hand to control your dog). Teaching by fear or physical manipulation is outdated and not necessary. Use reward based methods to relax your dog and build his trust in you.

A dog will dominate you

NO – Dominance is used as an excuse to explain poor behaviour and in our domestic environment a dog will always do what has worked before. They very rarely exert dominance over a human and many fear reactions can be misinterpreted as 'dominant behaviour'.

Some breeds are just bad and cannot be helped

All breeds have different traits and natural behaviours. Therefore if you show them that they have done something right, they are likely to offer that behaviour again. Every dog is individual, with individual needs and different living environments.

He knows, he is just being difficult

Are you sure he knows what you want? Dogs learn by the association of given behaviour and what immediately happens after that behaviour. Punishing a dog for something he did 4 hours ago or while you are out at work will have the effect of making him scared of you. Therefore, if you constantly reward good behaviour and repeat basic training in short sessions over a period of days and weeks – you WILL end up with a dog that knows what you expect.

Things you can do to help the situation

- Reward him more – show him what he is doing right through rewards instead of just noticing and punishing wrong behaviour
- Don't use threatening behaviour – sometimes this stops your dog doing what he is doing but will create un-trust in you and can create further problems arising in the future. Be calm and patient – your dog will follow suit.
- Make yourself fun and interesting – you don't need to reduce the dogs rank, what you need to do is get him to target you by using rewards and games to hold his attention.
- Is he bored? – Do not leave your dog on his own for long periods and ensure he is getting enough exercise and mental stimulation. An under-active, frustrated dog is a dog that causes chaos. A well exercised dog will be happy to sleep and relax.
- Good Diet or Bad Diet? – A dog's behaviour can be seriously affected by a poor diet (too much protein can cause aggression) A dry complete food or a diet recommended by your vet can do wonders!
- Vet Check – before spending money on a behaviourist, make sure your dog is not ill or in pain (another cause of aggression)
- Judge Yourself – Have a deep look at how you are. Are you calm and happy? Are you tolerant and patient? Sometimes you have to change your lifestyle or inner happiness to ensure continued success.