

How Early should we start training & socialising our Puppy?

With many years of experience, first with my own puppies and then in latter years as a professional dog trainer the subject of how soon should we start training our puppies often crops up.

What is training? Is it just making sure that puppy learns the ways of living in a home environment or teaching them to sit and come to our command?

All Dogs have basic instinctive behaviours that they are born with, this is survival, chasing, playing, digging, resource guarding but to name a few. Some instincts or breed specific behaviours can vary due to years of breeding to be fit for purpose. For example, Herding, guarding, rodent control, retrieving and companionship. Knowing the breed that you have is the first thing to consider when providing the motivation and reward to give your puppy the best chance to succeed. Hopefully the research to find the perfect breed for you has been done prior to getting puppy, but sadly more often this is an after thought and fashion trends and the attractiveness of a breed is often the decision to make the choice of the breed you have.

So the question, when do we start training our puppies? Without a doubt as soon as they arrive at our home. The first thing to establish is the feeling of safety and to attend to the loss of Mum's and sibling company. Creating good rules and boundaries before puppy arrives and sticking to them. Having a safe confinement area where accidents don't matter, getting a strict toileting routine going and making sure that puppy is in areas where you are, so we can capture the behaviours as they happen. Crates and pens are an excellent investment but time must be spent getting puppy to feel happy in them.

When Kia my GS came to live with us at 8 weeks she had a bedtime crate within the utility room where we confine our dogs. (covered with a sheet, she had a comfy warm bed with soft toys and the towel that came home with her covered in the scent of her siblings, I also popped an old fleece jumper of mine with my scent on in there). By 7-8 months the crate was replaced with a normal dog bed. We also had a large daytime crate full of toys a water bowl and she went in there when we popped out or if I wanted to get along with chores.

Once each toileting trip outside was fruitful then she would be allowed supervised freedom outside the crate.

So the rules and boundaries are underway, puppy is learning what He/She can have or not have, how to behave politely with the humans and other animals in the home. When do we start obedience Training? the answer, immediately too. Two weeks in to Kia arriving at 8 weeks old, she could sit, in front and at heel, follow happily on a lead and collar. She walked around my legs on a "round" command, she could lay down on command and was well into understanding outside was where she must toilet and she would perform on the wee wee and poo poo command, still does today at 3 years of age. She was learning that leave it! Meant that you mustn't have it, this was especially useful with the love of our pebbled back garden. She came happily to her name and then when she was allowed out, she could be off the lead after the second walk, however it did help to have an obedient older dog to follow. That is the best time to build your confidence to let puppy off the lead as the bond and reassurance of your company is at it's strongest. The most useful command She learned was "Ta!" that was to happily give me anything out of her mouth.

As well as the instinctive behaviours that puppy is born with there are the learned behaviours.

What are learned behaviours? They are self learned by just experiencing the environment and also what we set out to teach them, good manners, obedience, tricks and agility.

Learning starts as soon as puppy is born. Does puppy have to fight for Mum's milk, interaction with the siblings comfort and discipline from Mum, then the introduction to home environments and handling before you get puppy is more important than most people are aware. This part can go horribly wrong with a bad breeder, puppy farm environment or when adopting a rescue pup from an animal sanctuary with unknown history.

The learned behaviours then continue when puppy comes to live with you. They are learning the whole time they are awake, from experiences in the environment and things we teach them.

Dogs learn by association and reward. When we teach a sit for example we capture the moment the bottom hits the floor, we then praise and to reinforce the behaviour we may give puppy a treat. Adding the verbal "sit" cue at the moment the bottom hits the floor will create the association of the action in your puppies brain with the word SIT and then because it has been repeated and rewarded, puppy then learns to sit on command.

Often behaviours are learned through experiences and self reward.

Examples of this, puppy discovers that there are some nice tasty leftovers in the bin, knocks over the bin and get rewarded by eating the treats, that was good thinks puppy and begins to repeat raiding the bin. Puppy pinches an item of ours, we chase puppy to get it back, puppy learns to pinch things to have a wonderful rewarding game of chase and get your undying attention too.

A huge part of training is Socialisation, this really is the most misunderstood word in my experiences and is a huge part of the learning process. Making sure that puppy is introduced to everything you expect it to experience for the years ahead with you should be handled carefully. Does it mean that puppy must go up and be friendly towards everyone? Does it mean that puppy should get along with and play with every dog they meet? No! You wouldn't expect or encourage a child to run up to every stranger to jump on them and expect them to play and build a wonderful friendship.

Far better and safer for them to learn occasional polite greetings and to behave calmly around people.

Remember that word association? If puppy learns to associate people with excitement, jumping up and all dogs with play then you will end up with a very unruly dog who will embarrass you when out and about. Usually this is the point when I get called for behavioural advice. Teaching puppy to be polite with people and controlling the people so that they don't undo your good training. Teaching them to walk past most dogs and being choosy who they interact with will make walks pleasurable and not a nightmare. Socialisation is a calm acceptance of the environment.

So Yes! The answer is, training must start immediately and it continues throughout your dog's life.

Happy Training!

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