

Puppy Training



Bringing your puppy home for the first time is an exciting event for all concerned. Although this little creature seems so tiny and vulnerable now, he is very quickly going to grow into an adult dog, with canine characteristics and behaviour significantly different to his new human family. These early days and weeks are crucial in your puppy's up-bringing, and are a time for building the foundations for a trouble free life together. Time spent now, creating good habits, will pay dividends in the future.

Settling in:

Your puppy needs a warm, comfortable place of his own, where he feels safe, and can settle down to rest when he wants. Initially, a cardboard box lined with newspapers or a washable blanket is perfectly adequate, and a proper dog bed can be purchased as the puppy grows up. Avoid bedding made from materials that might be harmful if swallowed, such as cane baskets or bean bags, as nearly all puppies chew! Place the puppy's bed in a warm, draught free place, ideally somewhere with a hard, easily cleanable floor, such as a kitchen or utility room. Put the puppy in his bed whenever he flops down, tired, after playing so he gets used to settling there.

Your puppy will probably cry when shut away in the kitchen or utility room the first night, and you need to be prepared to overcome this. Do not be tempted to have the puppy in your bedroom, as it is better to avoid creating bad habits in the first place than to alter them later. A meal last thing at night will help make the puppy sleepy and ready to settle. When you are ready to leave him, put him quietly in his bed and go out of the room. Do not keep returning to reassure him when he cries - if you reward the crying in this way, he will carry on doing it!

Some puppies may cry for a few minutes and then settle, while other more determined individuals may scream for what seems like all night for a week before accepting the situation, so if necessary, invest in some ear plugs for yourself and your neighbours! Once the puppy is used to his bed and your nightly routine, he will settle down happily and be no trouble. Equally importantly, if he is used to sleeping away from you at night, he will be less likely to be anxious when you have to leave him during the day.

Diet:

Try to stick to the diet the puppy is used to for the first few days, even if you intend to change it eventually. Your puppy is going through a stressful transition as he adjusts to his new home, and a sudden change of diet can cause debilitating digestive troubles not only putting his health at risk, but making house training difficult.

Gradually introduce a new diet over several days, once your puppy has settled in.

House Training:

Don't expect your puppy to be clean and dry at night for some time. Spread plenty of newspapers on the floor of the room where he sleeps to facilitate cleaning up, and NEVER chastise your puppy for a mess found in the morning - he will long since have forgotten doing it, and physically cannot go through the night at this age.

Young puppies need to pass urine and faeces very frequently, and especially after a meal or on waking after a nap. Use these times to your advantage, taking him out each time to a specially designated area of your garden, and staying with him until he performs.

Be very patient - at first you may find your puppy forgets what he was about to do when you take him outside, but stay there until he goes. Praise him and reward him with a titbit as soon as he has relieved himself - by rewarding him, you increase the likelihood that he will repeat the action in the same place. Teach the puppy to associate a command with his action by repeating a word or phrase, for example "Be quick" or "Be clean" when he is in the act of relieving himself - this will enable you to prompt him to perform whenever and wherever you want him to in the future.

Be observant and look out for the signs that your puppy needs to go out. Usually the puppy will start to circle, sniffing the floor, just before he squats, so learn to recognise this and take him outside immediately. The occasional accident is bound to happen, but do not chastise the puppy for his mistakes. If you catch him in the act, a disapproving "No" and praise when you remove him to the appropriate place is quite sufficient.

Punishment is counterproductive - puppies punished for their mistakes don't learn to be clean in the house any quicker, and they may in some cases just learn not to do it when you are present, making praising them for going in the correct place impossible. The golden rule is to be observant, praise and reward the puppy for going in the right place, and ignore mistakes - they are your fault, not the puppy's!

Feeding:

It is the pack leader's right to eat first, and to take any food he or she wants. One very easy way to show the puppy where in the pack he stands is by making it a routine always to feed him **after** the rest of the family have eaten, not just before.

Remove any uneaten food after 10 minutes - don't leave it down for the puppy to pick at when he or she chooses. Never share your own food with your puppy, either at meal times or when just having a snack - sharing food signals submissive behaviour in doggy terms. (This will also prevent your puppy from developing the annoying habit of "begging" for food when you are eating).

Sleeping:

The pack leader has the best bed! Additionally, it is usually raised above the ground and therefore important because of its height. Discourage any attempt by your puppy to leap onto the furniture or your lap uninvited. As stated previously, your dog should ideally sleep as far from the bedrooms as possible, and there should be no need for him to enter the bedroom - creating certain no-go areas where the dog is not allowed helps keep him at the bottom of the pack.

Toys and Games:

Games are an excellent way to exercise and occupy a young puppy and, like children, puppies learn through the games they play. It is important not to allow games to get out of hand, and to control what your puppy is learning. Encourage chasing and retrieving games rather than possessive tug-of-war, teaching the dog to play with you rather than compete with you for his toy.

Puppies need access to toys, but give him just one or two at a time, keeping the rest yourself. In this way he learns that the toys belong to you, not to him. Control games by initiating play times yourself rather than playing when the puppy wants you to.

Praise and reward your puppy for bringing you things, but don't stop and play with him every time he does so. Similarly, when playing with your puppy, stop the game yourself instead of continuing until the puppy loses interest.

Mouthing:

This can be a problem with some puppies, and should not be ignored on the grounds that "he'll grow out of it". He won't! The best approach is to stop playing instantly when the puppy bites.

When puppies play together they learn to inhibit the strength of their bite - the bitten puppy yelps and stops playing, causing the biter to stop short and be more gentle in future. You can mimic this behaviour by yelping yourself and stopping the game as soon as you feel those needle sharp teeth. Do this even when the puppy doesn't bite particularly hard, and also do it when he grabs hold of clothing during a game. In this way, the puppy will get the idea that humans are soft, fragile creatures, and biting hard is no fun!

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