

Raising a puppy: Obedience training classes

Written by Dr. Ian Dunbar

As soon as your puppy is three months old, there is an urgent need to play catch-up in terms of socialization and confidence building with other dogs. At the very latest, before he is eighteen weeks old, your pup should start puppy training classes. Four-and-a-half months marks a critical juncture in your dog's development, the point at which he changes from puppy to adolescent, sometimes virtually overnight. You certainly want to be enrolled in class before your pup collides with adolescence. I cannot overemphasize the importance of placing yourself under the guidance and tutelage of a professional pet dog trainer during your dog's difficult transition from puppyhood to adolescence.

Puppy classes allow your pup to develop canine social savvy while playing with other puppies in a non-threatening and controlled setting. Shy and fearful pups quickly gain confidence in leaps and bounds and bullies learn to tone it down and be gentle.

Puppy play sessions are crucially important. Play is essential for pups to build confidence and learn canine social etiquette, so that later on as socialized adult dogs they would much rather play than either fight or take flight. If not sufficiently socialized as puppies, dogs generally lack the confidence to have fun and play as adults. Moreover, once they are fearful or aggressive as adults, dogs can be difficult to rehabilitate. Luckily, these potentially serious problems with adult dogs are easily prevented in puppyhood, simply by letting puppies play with each other. So give your puppy this opportunity. It's not fair to condemn your dog to a lifetime of social worry and anxiety by denying him the opportunity to play during puppyhood.

This is not to say that a socialized dog will never spook or scrap. A socialized dog may be momentarily startled, but he gets over it quickly. Unsocialized dogs do not. Also, socialized dogs, which have encountered all sizes and sorts of dogs, are better equipped to deal with occasional encounters with unsocialized or unfriendly dogs.

Most puppy classes are family-oriented, so your pup will have opportunities to socialize with all sorts of people—men, women, and especially, children. And then there is the training game. It will blow your mind how much your pup learns in just his very first lesson. Dogs learn to come, sit, and lie down when requested, to stand still and roll over for examination, to listen to their owners, and to ignore distractions. Additionally, of course, puppy classes are an absolute blast! You will never forget your pup's first night in class. Puppy classes are an adventure, both for you and for your dog.

Remember, you are attending puppy class for *you* to learn! And there's still an awful lot to learn. You'll pick up numerous useful tips for resolving behavior problems. You'll learn how to control the rambunctiousness that is inevitably part and parcel of doggy adolescence. But, most important of all, you'll learn how to control your puppy's biting behavior.

The ultimate reason for puppy classes

The number one reason for attending puppy class is to provide your puppy with the very best opportunity to fine-tune his bite inhibition. Whether your puppy is still biting you too much and harder than you would like, or whether he is biting less than necessary to develop reliable bite inhibition, puppy play sessions are the solution. Other puppies are the very best teachers. They say, "Bite me too hard and I'm not going to play with you anymore!" Since puppies want to spend all their time play-fighting and play-biting, they end up teaching other puppies bite-inhibition.

Classes of young puppies of about the same age generate high energy and activity levels, pretty much on par with groups of similar-aged children. Each puppy stimulates the others to give chase and play-fight, such that the frequency of bites during puppy play is astronomical. Moreover, each puppy tends to rev up all the others, such

that the physical nature of the play and the force of play-bites periodically increase to the point where one puppy predictably bites another too hard and receives the appropriate feedback. A young puppy's skin is extremely sensitive, so pups are likely to provide immediate and convincing feedback when bitten too hard. In fact, a pup is likely to receive better feedback regarding the force of his bites during a single one-hour puppy class than he would all week from his owners at home. Moreover, much of the pup's bite inhibition with other dogs will generalize to good bite inhibition with people, making the pup easier to train and control at home.

Now, as mentioned earlier, even well socialized dogs may have occasional disagreements and squabbles. After all, who doesn't? But just as we have learned how to resolve disagreements with each other and with our dogs in a socially acceptable manner without tearing flesh or breaking bones, so can socialized dogs. Although it is unrealistic to expect dogs never to squabble and scrap, it is absolutely realistic to expect dogs to settle their differences without mutilating people or other dogs. It all depends on the level of bite inhibition they develop while mouthing other puppies in play. So get your puppy enrolled in puppy class right away. Have him develop a super soft mouth so that all his woofs are friendly and furry.

"The vet says our puppy is too young for class"

Understandably, veterinarians care about the physical health of their patients. Common and serious infectious diseases such as parvovirus and distemper are a big concern with young puppies, which require a series of immunizations to produce solid immunity. By three months of age, puppies only have 70-75 percent immunity, so there is justifiable concern that they are still at risk if exposed to infection. But puppy classrooms are pretty safe places, since only vaccinated puppies are present and the floors are regularly cleaned and sterilized. Besides, your puppy's physical health is only part of the picture. Psychological and behavioral health are equally important.

A puppy's risk of infection depends on his level of immunity and the infectiousness of the environment. A puppy's immunity increases with successive immunizations until it approaches 99 percent immunity at five months of age. Different environments range from relatively safe to extremely hazardous. But no animal is 100 percent immune to disease, and no environment is 100 percent safe.

If physical health were the only concern, I would advise that puppies not venture out into potentially infected areas until they are at least five to six months old. However, a puppy's behavior, temperament, bite inhibition, and mental well-being are equally as important as physical health. Each year in the United States, an average of five puppies per veterinary clinic die from parvovirus, whereas several hundred are euthanized because of behavior and temperament problems. Indeed, behavior problems are the dog's most common terminal illness during his first year of life. And just as a developing puppy needs immunizations against infectious diseases, he also requires social and educational "immunizations" to prevent him from developing behavior and temperament problems. For all-around health, a young puppy must receive immunization against disease, but he must also get out and about on walks, to dog parks, and to puppy classes as soon as possible.

The older the puppy, the better his immunity. Keep your young puppy as safe as possible-at home-but as he gets older he may venture out to less safe areas, such as puppy classes. Once your adolescent dog has maximal immunity, he may more safely explore more hazardous areas such as sidewalks and dog parks.

It is a sad fact of life that your puppy is always at risk. For example, dried feces carrying parvovirus may blow in the wind and end up in your garden or home. Or a family member could step in infected urine and feces and track it through the home. So maintain routine hygiene and leave outdoor shoes outside. The safest place for your young puppy is inside your home or fenced backyard. Keep him there until he is three months old. Before your puppy is three months old, he has household manners to master and many pressing socialization exercises to do in the safety of your home. Other relatively safe places include your car and the homes and fenced yards of family and friends. So it is possible for your pup to begin to safely explore the world at large. Just remember to carry him between house and car.

As I've said, indoor puppy classes provide a pretty safe environment, but I would still recommend carrying the pup between car and class. Luckily, the breeds that sometimes have immunity problems-Rotties and Dobies, for example-are slow developers, and it is fine to delay starting class until they are four months old. I actually prefer bigger, slower-maturing dogs to start class at four months so that adolescent problems can be dealt with while the

dog is still in class. Otherwise, if a big dog starts class at three months of age, he will graduate at four-and-a-half months and the owner is still under the misapprehension that they are living with a teddy bear.

I would similarly advise to delay taking your puppy to dog parks or for walks in public places frequented by other dogs (and may be contaminated with a variety of viruses and other infectious agents) until he is at least four months old. You can always practice leash walking around your house and yard before performing in public, and you should be inviting people to your house on a regular basis.

"But our puppy's great with our other dog at home"

Your puppy may be Mr. Sociable with your other dog, but you're in for a shock when your puppy goes out alone, whether for a walk on the street, to a dog park, or to training class. You will quickly find that your dog is not socialized at all. Instead he will likely run and hide and defensively growl, lunge, and snap.

Your puppy may appear to be extremely well socialized and friendly at home, but he is only socialized and friendly to one dog. Also, he has likely become over-dependent on one dog, and when he goes out alone for the first time, he will fall apart, missing the security and company of his best friend and bodyguard, your other dog.

Socialization requires meeting a variety of dogs. To keep a socialized puppy socialized, he needs to meet unfamiliar dogs every day. So walk your puppy and take him on regular trips to dog parks. And be sure to enroll him in puppy classes.

What to look for in a puppy class

One hopes you will have checked out a variety of classes before you get your puppy so that you will have a pretty good idea of what you are looking for. But here are a few tips:

Avoid puppy classes that advocate the use of any metal collar or any means of physical punishment that frightens, harms, or causes pain to your pup. Push-pull, leash-jerk, grab-and-shake, alpha rollover, and domination techniques are now considered ineffective, besides being adversarial and unpleasant. These out-of-date methods are now, thank goodness, by and large a thing of the past.

Remember, this is your puppy. His education, safety, and sanity are in your hands. There are so many good puppy schools. Search until you find one.

Look for puppy classes where the pups are given ample opportunity to play together off-leash and where pups are frequently trained and settled down during the play session, using toys and treats and fun and games. Off-leash puppy play is vital, but equally as important, the play session must include many short training interludes, so owners may practice controlling their pup when he is worked up and distracted. Look for classes where puppies learn quickly and owners are pleased with their puppies' progress. And above all look for classes where the trainer, puppies, and owners are all having a good time!

You be the judge, and judge wisely. Choosing a suitable puppy class is one of your most important puppy husbandry decisions.

To receive a list of Certified Pet Dog Trainers in your area contact the Association of Pet Dog Trainers. Check online at www.apdt.com or call 1-800-PET-DOGS.

Excerpted from *After You Get Your Puppy*, by Ian Dunbar.

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