

How does my puppy learn?

By John Roberson

Having acquired your new puppy, how do you go about teaching him all of the commands that are necessary in order to end up with a well socialized and easily controlled adult? One thing is for sure and that is without any formal education your pride and joy will end up being out of control and a liability to you and your family. Puppies have no concept of how to interpret and obey commands as they grow and mature and, like children, must have some formal education if they are to realize their full potential. So we will begin by examining how a puppy learns in order to understand how we can train it.

There are basically two types of behavior, innate behavior which means preprogrammed in at birth, and learned behavior which means that it is acquired as the result of personal experiences in the environment.

Innate behavior can be manipulated genetically and will depend on your chosen breed of dog and how strong certain traits were in its parents and grandparents. This is unfortunately where lots of pet owners get things wrong as they select a breed on its looks rather than on its likely behavior. Most dogs that end up with behavior problems are merely displaying normal behavior for that breed but in an inappropriate environment!

Learned behavior is what we are more interested in because we can manipulate the learning process so that we end up with a well-trained dog that has learned to display only appropriate behavior within its environment. For training to begin you will need two basic ingredients, one is a reason for the puppy to adopt a particular behavior, and the other is your ability to influence how your puppy reacts to certain situations. And so we come to Thorndyke's Law of Effect which basically says that behavior changes because of its consequences. If a behavior has a pleasant consequence then that behavior will be likely to be repeated. If a behavior has an unpleasant consequence, it is less likely to be repeated. Simple isn't it? Well it would be apart from one significant point and that is that the dog must associate its actions with something pleasant in order to want to repeat the behavior or something unpleasant in order to avoid the behavior on the next occasion. Thus, punishing a dog more than two seconds after the event will be doomed to failure as the punishment cannot be linked to the crime in the dogs mind. Similarly rewarding the dog more than two seconds after a desirable behavior will not increase the likelihood of the behavior being repeated. Promising a reward at some point in the future or threatening punishment is also unlikely to get the required behavior!

Rewards have to be given immediately for them to be effective and the type of reward given will have a bearing on how strong the behavior becomes. A pat on the head and the words "good boy" will be sufficient for a simple behavior such

as sitting on command. But calling a dog away from other dogs when it is playing will need something much more rewarding such as a game with a favorite toy or a tasty food treat in addition to the pat on the head and the words "good boy".

Most owners are totally unaware of the multitude of rewards that are available to them for use in training. By answering the following questions you should end up with a list of rewards that you can make use of in training your puppy.

1. Name five things, in order of importance, that your dog would choose to play with if he or she were given a free choice in the matter.
2. Name five foods in order of preference that your dog would like to eat if given a free choice.
3. Which of these forms of physical attention does your dog like the most? Place them in order of his preference: stroking, cuddling, patting, tummy tickling, scratching.
4. Name five places that your dog would choose to go if a free choice was given and what would he choose to do when he arrived there?
5. Which words or phrases start your dogs tail wagging happily and which words or phrases cause a tail lowered, ears back, looking sorry for itself expression?

How did you do with the questions?

If your dog's favorite thing to play with is another dog, if he has no real desire to be stroked, cuddled etc., and would choose to go somewhere by himself and do something independently of you when he arrived there then you do not really have much chance of influencing his behavior and will have to resort to using food for the time being until you have built up a better relationship with your pet.

If your dogs favorite toy is the one that you supplied for him to play with, if he likes to be stroked and touched and would choose to go somewhere with you and wanted to be around you when he got there then you will have a major influence on how his behavior develops.

One of the most important things to teach your puppy is to come back when he is called and this training is best started when he is just a few weeks old and as soon as he has settled into your environment. It is a big mistake to wait until the puppy is a few months old to start this training as he will want to explore further a field by then which makes training him to come to you much more difficult. Begin in the house by calling his name and using the command "come". Offer him a food treat as an inducement and remember to smile and appear inviting. There is no need to bellow the command, just an ordinary spoken voice will do. When your puppy arrives expecting the food treat stroke him first, tell him what a good puppy he is and then give one small treat, wait for three seconds and repeat the sequence of touch, speak and treat at least seven more times. Use small pieces of his ordinary dog food and do not be tempted to use anything extra tasty.

Special food treats are going to be reserved for when you go outside where there may be many distractions for him to cope with. The sequence or rhythm of rewards is crucial to teaching a good recall. Remember that you do not simply want your puppy to come to you, grab the food and then wander away again; you want him to come and remain with you in the expectation that there are more rewards to come.

Just as soon as he is reliable in coming to you whenever you call him in the house it is time to start taking him outside and repeating the lessons. The sooner that you do this the better as his instinct to explore will not be very well developed and he will usually not wander too far away. It is best to use a fully enclosed area away from roads for the first lessons. The trick now is to repeat the training but now you must keep him guessing as to what reward(s) he will get when he returns, when he will get them (three seconds, five seconds etc.) and how many rewards he will get. When you have repeated this lesson a few times you are ready to put Mr. Thorndyke's law into effect. For this last stage in your training you are going to teach a consequence to the behavior of coming when called and a consequence of disobeying the command to return. For this stage you will need a fifteen-foot length of very fine cord attached to your puppy's collar and an assistant who is known to him. Let your puppy off the lead but allow it to trail the line behind. When your puppy is preoccupied in sniffing or exploring, call him back to you. If he comes to you then explode with excitement and give several rewards. If he does not come immediately then have your assistant stand on the end of the line to restrict his movements. Walk up to your puppy and show him all of the rewards that you had for him. You can tease him with them but do not let him have anything. Then calmly walk away and ignore him. Ask your assistant to take their foot off the line and you will probably find that your puppy will run to you. Be a little cool and rejecting, do not offer any rewards! Your puppy should wonder why you are not giving him anything and will probably try to attract your attention but just go on ignoring him. When he does wander away, call him to you and when he comes running you should shower him with rewards. It usually only takes a few sessions for the puppy to realize the consequences of his actions and you should then get a good, fast recall each and every time that you call him.

Remember that if you have good control over your dog then he will enjoy more freedom than a dog that is out of its owner's control.

The next important behavior to teach is walking on a leash so that your arm is not pulled out of its socket.

You may be interested to know that a canine beautician can tell within minutes how hard the dog pulls on the lead without ever having seen the owner walking it. This is because when they put a lead on to restrain it for grooming, if the dog pulls and struggles against the restraint, then it follows that the dog will do the same when it is being walked.

Just think of the concept of how most owners introduce their puppy to a collar and lead. They attach a soft collar for a few minutes each day until the puppy accepts it. They then attach a lead and let the puppy drag the lead around to get it used to that piece of equipment. Is it then surprising to see owners being dragged around when they are at the end of this lead? Any puppy can learn how to walk correctly on a lead by teaching them how to accept being restrained. This is done by attaching a soft collar and lead and fastening the lead to a fixed object. The puppy should then be groomed and handled all over, ignoring any wriggling and struggling and only releasing it when it is calm and accepting of the restraint. If this is done everyday before the puppy was old enough to go out for walks then pulling on the lead would never arise. This is due to a process referred to as premature conceptual learning. Fancy words that simply mean that when an animal is still very young we can imprint lots of information about the world in which it lives before it has the chance to explore these boundaries for itself. Thus, if we teach a puppy to accept that, when fastened on a collar and lead to an immovable object, its world only extends to the extremity of the lead and struggling, biting at the lead or pulling has no effect on the restraint then it will usually accept this for life.

House-training is one of the simpler tasks to teach a young dog because most arrive completely housetrained, courtesy of their mother! What the pup's mother will have taught her puppies is to move away from their sleeping area and seek out an alternative surface to the one that they rest on in order to eliminate on. To continue this training you must simply provide access to a surface or surfaces for your puppy to eliminate on that are different to those that it rests or sleeps on. This is how it is achieved. First of all keep a diary of your puppy's eating times, resting times and elimination times for around three days. You should notice a pattern emerging here where the puppy wants to sleep at certain times is hungry at certain times and wants to go to the toilet at certain times and on certain surfaces. All you need to do, armed with this knowledge, is to predict when the danger times are likely to be when he wants to go and give him access to YOUR preferred toileting surface, whilst denying him access to anything other than his preferred sleeping surface. - Simple! The only problem is that the surface that you choose may not be as attractive as the surface that he chooses. To encourage him to use the surface that you decide he should use all you need to do is transfer the smell of his urine and feces to this surface via a pair of rubber gloves and then take him there at the appropriate times and allow him to sniff. A little trick here is to scatter small food treats in a large circle around this area which will encourage him to sniff the ground and then, nature will do the rest.

- Don't use ammonia based cleaning agents to clean up afterwards as the smell often encourages the dog to use these areas again.
- Don't scold your dog physically or try and rub its nose in the mess. This will have the effect of making your dog hide from you when he wants to go to the toilet thus making the job of house-training much more difficult for you to accomplish.

- Only scold your dog verbally if you catch him in the act of going to the toilet.
- Keep a daily diary of elimination times, exercise times, your dogs preferred toileting surfaces etc. This makes it easy for a behavioral specialist to then provide you with a program that will cure even the most difficult house-training problems.
- Always inform your vet if you notice any sudden change in your dogs' toileting behavior.
- Be patient and try not to clear up any mess with your dog in attendance as this may have the effect of him learning to mess on the floor in order to gain attention.

It is a sad fact that some breeders make the job of house-training much more difficult for owners by keeping their puppies on just one type of surface. Without at least two surfaces available it is an impossible job for mum to teach her puppies how to move to an alternative surface when they want to go to the toilet. So when you go to get your puppy ask to see where the litter is being kept and then ask to see where they go to the toilet!

Car travel usually presents few problems, as long as the puppy is given many opportunities to associate going in the car with pleasant experiences. For many puppies the first car journey is very traumatic when they leave their mother, brothers and sisters for the first time and the car takes them to a new and strange place. Often the second journey is taken in the car to go to the vets and that again is not a particularly pleasant experience so you can see the reason that some puppies fear the car as a vehicle that will transport them to somewhere they may not choose to go themselves! The best, and safest, place for your puppy to be in your car is behind a sturdy dog guard or, better still, a purpose-made dog cage that can be removed from the car and taken into the house. Start in the house by getting your puppy used to spending short amounts of time in the traveling cage by feeding small portions of his food inside. If you can also use the cage to let your puppy rest inside when he becomes tired, then so much the better. This will habituate him to the cage and decrease any suspicion that he may hold toward it. The next step is to put the cage in the car and allow the pup to spend some time in it with you sat in the driver's seat. A few food treats usually help to get the puppy to settle. There is no need to go anywhere or start the engine, just sit and let the puppy realize that nothing unpleasant is going to happen. When your puppy is relaxed and confident then you can get him out and either take him for a walk or play with him so that he comes to associate going in the car with a very pleasant outcome. When he eagerly tries to jump in by himself then you can take him on as many short journeys as possible, making sure that he has something in the cage to occupy his mind. It is usually not necessary to sedate a young dog that is a bad traveler and this can often make matters worse, just use the above advice and your new dog will look forward to trips out in the family car.

Socialization and what it means

It is a common mistake to think that by merely taking your puppy to lots of places where there are people and other dogs then it will grow up to be well socialized. Socialization means learning how to behave in a socially acceptable manner with other people and animals within the community. Strange as it may seem the puppy's mother begins the socialization process by becoming more and more rejecting of her puppies which then forces them to seek social relationships elsewhere. A mother that is too protective of her puppies and constantly gives in to their demands for affection and attention does immeasurable harm to their proper social development.

The best way of achieving good social contact with people is to teach your puppy to play with toys so that this activity becomes one of the highlights of his day. Make sure that you teach your puppy to understand the rules under which games are played as, just like children; being allowed to win too many games can turn a puppy into a bully who gets bad tempered when he loses. Likewise, if he loses every game that he plays then he will not want to play with you at all. Retrieving is one of the best games to play with a puppy and it is incredibly easy to teach.

First, find something that your puppy is interested in, perhaps a sock or a glove or, alternatively a toy that you have bought for him. When he is wide awake and looking for mischief then get the toy or article and tease him with it. Throw it a short distance and allow him to run and pick it up - **DO NOT CHASE AFTER HIM** - that will make him think that you are competing for the toy and force him into taking avoiding action. Wait for a minute and you will see that he takes it to a particular spot in the room and lies down with it to chew. **SLOWLY** get up and move toward him without looking him in the eye and then sit and extend your arm and stroke him and gently reassure him with your voice. Do not attempt to take the toy from him at this stage. When he finally releases the toy, quickly tease him with it and return to the spot that you originally threw it from and allow him to pick it up and take it to his 'safe' spot. Once again go quietly over and sit with him and stroke him as before and then repeat the whole process once again and for as long as he retains an interest in playing the game. Play in this manner for a couple of sessions and then change the game slightly. Now you are going to throw the toy and when your pup runs out to pick it up, go and sit in the spot that he usually takes it to. Guess what? He will probably bring it right to you and lie alongside or behind you to be stroked. Repeat this several times and then move your position a distance of two yards or so in any direction. It is quite possible that your puppy will still take the toy to the old location and lie down with it so just ignore him for a few seconds then use your voice to encourage him to come closer to you. Scratching your nails on the carpet will usually do the trick. When he comes to you remember to praise well with your voice and hands before you even think about taking the toy away to throw it for him once again. A couple more sessions and your puppy should bring the toy to you wherever you are sitting and all that remains is to use several toys now so that he releases the one

that he has in order to chase and retrieve the one that you have. Remember that if he picks up anything that he should not have it is then easier (and safer) to call him to you with the words "good boy, fetch" rather than the words "bad boy, leave."

When he has learnt to retrieve correctly for you then you can introduce him to all of your friends that visit the house by simply throwing the toy for your puppy to retrieve. Do this a couple of times and then give the toy to them to throw for the pup while you exit the room for a short while. Of course if you were to stay in the room then the puppy would ignore your friends and want to play with you but for the few minutes that you are absent then they become a welcome playmate. This is far better than allowing your puppy to either use your friends as though they were toys or worse, growing up in fear of people that come to visit.

As for socialization with other dogs all you need to do is find a friend who owns a mature, sensible adult dog and allow your puppy contact with it a couple of times each week under close supervision. Remember that you should not allow your puppy to do anything to the adult in play that will get him into trouble if he tries it on with other dogs when he gets older. It is your role to teach him what is acceptable and what is unacceptable play behavior. Of course a sensible mature dog will have a great influence on his developing play behavior around other dogs as well. If you are your puppy's best friend then you should experience few problems and with a little care and understanding he should grow into a much loved and admired family pet.

So there you have it, some examples of how you can very simply and quickly train your puppy using a system that satisfies all of the rules by which the dog learns. Of course if you do not take the time and trouble to teach your dog these things then the environment will do it for you, by rewarding actions in your dog that you will then find unacceptable. But you cannot blame your dog for that; it is either down to you formally educating your puppy or leaving him to educate himself.