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PUPPY TRAINING: TAKING CHARGE

Dogs are a highly social "pack" species. Each pack has a leader that the other members follow and look to for "direction". When puppies enter our homes the family become the new pack. Puppies adapt well to this artificial pack as long as the members of the family take on the role of leader. A pushy puppy receiving insufficient guidance and discipline and allowed to get his own way, may eventually emerge as "pack leader" in the home.

When is the best time to begin training my puppy?

Formal dog training has traditionally been delayed until 6 months of age. Actually, this juvenile stage is a poor time to begin training. The dog is beginning to solidify adult behavioral patterns, dominance behavior is emerging, and behaviors that they have learned in puppyhood may need to be changed. Therefore, it is best to begin teaching puppies from the time they are obtained. One important task to begin early is to establish yourself as the leader. This can be done by control and the use of appropriate discipline and body handling techniques.

Are physical exercises necessary for gaining control?

Although there are many physical techniques that have been advocated for gaining control, it is the owners' attitudes, actions, and responses to the new puppy (along with the puppy's genetics) that are most important in the puppy becoming either well-mannered and responsive, or stubborn and disobedient.

Dog training literature has often discussed using scruff shakes and rollover techniques to discipline puppies. While these may change behavior, they are harsh and could lead to fear, anxiety and retaliation. It is much easier to teach what you want, rather than discipline what you don't want. This makes a positive, learning environment for the puppy to grow up in. There are advantages to teaching your puppy to assume subordinate postures and this can be accomplished with training the dog to obey commands for rewards. In addition to basic training, there are a number of physical exercises that can help to establish owner leadership. (See body handling below).

How can I gain control without physical exercises?

The best way to show the puppy from the outset that each family member is in control, is to teach your puppy that each reward must be earned. The puppy should learn to display subordinate postures through reward training, rather than forcing the puppy to perform. Begin with some basic obedience training, teaching the puppy to sit, stay and lie down for rewards. Practice short sessions, multiple times each day. Whenever the puppy is to receive anything of value (affection, attention, food, play and walks) the puppy should first be taught to earn its reward by performing a simple obedience task such as "sit" or "stay". Teach the puppy that rewards of any sort will never be given on demand. Also known as "nothing in life is free", a term coined by veterinary behaviorist, Victoria Voith, the puppy must be taught that vocalization, nipping, mouthing, overly rambunctious, or demanding behaviors of any sort will never earn rewards. In fact, these behaviors should be met by inattention or by confining the puppy for a few minutes until it settles down. Another option is to immediately control and calm the puppy with a head collar. Only when the puppy is performing appropriate responses should rewards be given.

You can also hold your puppy in submissive postures, and give it rewards for compliance. Do this when the puppy is calm, such as after a nap. Avoid fear and struggling. Be gentle, and only make the puppy be still for a few seconds in the beginning. A submissive posture may be gently holding your puppy on its side in a down position. Gradually you can increase the time you make your puppy submit. These sessions also have the added benefit of teaching your puppy to be still for later activities like grooming, teeth brushing and other maintenance tasks.

Set limits on the puppy so that it can learn that you are in control. Having the puppy sleep in its own bed or own cage rather than on your bed or couch, helps to keep it in a subordinate position. When the puppy is taken for walks it should be taught to follow. This should begin at the front door where the puppy should be taught to sit, wait, and follow, and never allowed to lead or pull you through the doorway.

What should I do if my puppy misbehaves?

Undesirable misbehavior must be prevented, or corrected in the act. Allowing the puppy, even once to perform an undesirable behavior such as entering a restricted room, jumping up, mounting or jumping onto the couch will serve to reward and encourage the repetition of the behavior.

There will be times when your new puppy misbehaves. How you reprimand your puppy will often influence later interactions. Young puppies are very impressionable and easily intimidated. Keep this in mind as you discipline your puppy. Harsh physical reprimands are contraindicated. They only serve to frighten the puppy and perhaps make them hand shy. Unfortunately, animals can learn in one trial if something is aversive enough. We want young puppies to look toward a human hand as something pleasant that brings comfort, food and affection. Puppies are easily disciplined with vocal intonation and loud noises. What is equally important is to redirect the puppy to the correct behavior after you interrupt what you do not like. Remember that punishment must take place while the behavior is occurring, not after.

If you catch your puppy misbehaving, try a loud noise such as clapping your hands or a loud "uh-uh". Remember, reprimands need to occur while the behavior is happening, preferably just as it begins, and never after. Often puppies will be startled when they hear these noises and temporarily stop the behavior. At that time you need to tell the puppy "good dog" and quickly redirect the puppy to a more appropriate task.

Another way to interrupt your puppy is with various types of noise devices. One such device is a "shaker can". This is an empty soda can that has a few pennies inside and then is taped shut. When given a vigorous shake it makes a loud noise, which will interrupt the puppy's behavior. Another device that makes a loud noise is the so called "rape alarm". When activated they make a shrill, loud, piercing noise, which will startle the puppy. Ultrasonic and sonic dog training devices are also available. The most important thing that you can do to avoid undesirable behavior is to supervise your puppy. Unsupervised puppies will chew and destroy objects as part of their natural curiosity and play. Rather than finding yourself with the need to reprimand your puppy, keep your puppy on a leash to avoid bad behaviors. Always provide suitable play objects designed to entertain your puppy so that it will not want to destroy your possessions.

Most importantly, if you find something that your puppy has destroyed but you did not catch him in the act, just clean it up and vow to supervise your puppy better in the future. Do not go get your puppy and bring him over to the mess and yell and physically discipline him. Remember that you need to punish the behavior you wish to change at the time it occurs. If you did not see your puppy chew up the object, all you are doing is disciplining your puppy for being present at a mess on the floor. Since that makes no sense to your puppy, your reprimands could create fear and anxiety, which could lead to aggression and owner avoidance.

What can be done for the particularly stubborn, disobedient, or headstrong puppy?

Puppies that are particularly headstrong and stubborn might need some fairly stringent rules. Tug-of-war games should only be allowed if the owner initiates the game, and can successfully call an end to the game,

with an "out", or "give" command when it is time to call it quits. Rough play must not escalate to uncontrollable play biting that cannot be controlled by the owner.

One of the best management tools for gaining safe and effective control at all times, is a head collar. The puppy can be supervised and controlled from a distance by leaving a long line or leash attached to the head halter. The principle of halter training is to gain control over the dog with as much natural communication as possible and without the use of punishment. Positive reinforcement is used to encourage proper behavior. A pull on the leash is used to disrupt misbehavior. Since the halter is attached to the dog's muzzle, common behavior problems (nipping, barking, jumping up, pulling, stealing food, etc.) can immediately be interrupted without fear or pain by pulling on the leash. The halter places pressure around the muzzle and behind the neck. This simulates the muzzle and neck restraint that a leader or mother dog might apply to a subordinate, and therefore is a highly effective and natural form of control.

What types of handling should I begin with when I start to train my puppy?

A. Body Handling

You will do yourself and your new pet a favor by teaching your new puppy to allow you to handle his body. Throughout the life of your dog there will be times that you need to handle various parts of the dog's body. You may need to wipe their feet, clean their ears, give medication or bandage a paw. Yet if you have never handled your dog these simple tasks could become impossible. Handling also serves to simulate the physical communication that is exhibited by a bitch controlling her puppies or a leader dog over a subordinate group member. You should gently handle your puppy daily. Pick a time when your puppy is calm, like just after a nap. Do not try to start a body handling exercise when your puppy is excited, rambunctious or in the mood for play.

Place the puppy in your lap and touch the feet, open the mouth, look in the ears and under the tail. All the while, praise your puppy for being good, even offer a few tasty food treats. Be sure to keep initial sessions very short, since you want your puppy to succeed and not struggle. If the session is too long you run the risk of the puppy struggling and getting free. This could send a message to your puppy that it can "win". Always set up the puppy to succeed, but on your terms. Gradually increase the amount of time you control your puppy so that no struggle ensues. Soon the puppy will allow and perhaps anticipate these handling sessions. Then when you need to, you can treat your dog. All family members should participate in this exercise. An adult should supervise young children. If you see any hesitance or reluctance on the part of the puppy, you will want to repeat the exercise, until you can accomplish the handling without resistance. Do the same exercise a little more gently or in a slightly different location, and give some tasty treats for compliance, and progress gradually to more difficult situations. Never force the puppy to the point that it exhibits fear or attempts escape. On the other hand if you do not gradually overcome the resistance the puppy may never allow the handling as an adult. Over time your puppy should allow you to place pressure on the back of its neck while it is in a down position, to roll it onto its side, to grasp its muzzle and to be lifted (if it is small enough). These forms of handling should not be used for punishment.

B. Food and toy guarding

Another exercise that is so important is to acclimate your puppy to having his food and possessions touched by humans. Dogs in the wild will guard their food to prevent its loss but that is not necessary in the home. We are not going to take away our pet's food and not give it back. Handle the food bowl while your puppy eats, pet the puppy and perhaps lift the bowl, place in a special treat, and return it. When walking past the puppy while it is eating you can place a treat in its food bowl, or reach down, pat the puppy and give a treat. This way the puppy learns to tolerate intrusions and disturbance while it eats and will not be startled and react aggressively should something unexpected happen when eating. If the treat you add is tasty enough, the puppy may even look forward to your approaches during feeding. If any growling should emerge you should seek professional guidance immediately.

You should also practice gently taking toys from the puppy. Quietly and calmly place your hand on the toy and tell your puppy "give" as you remove it from its mouth. Then say "thank-you" and return the object as you tell your puppy to "take it". Repeat this training task multiple times daily in multiple locations. At times take the object and offer a treat instead, this will let your puppy know that sometimes something better comes from relinquishing the object. You should be able to handle any toy that your puppy has. This sends the message to the puppy that it is okay for you to handle its possessions, and that you will give them back. The puppy will trust you and then when you need to remove something from the mouth, your dog should accept your interference.