

Basic Training

Teaching Your Puppy
to Mind Her Manners



When to begin

Puppy training can begin at an early age, even as young as 8-12 weeks, and often goes much faster and smoother when the pup is young. Early training can help with important areas of puppy learning, including establishing leadership, socializing, and preventing unruly behavior.

To successfully train a puppy, it is important to use correct training methods. Puppies don't learn well with forceful training. In addition, too much force during your puppy's formative months can ruin your bond with your pet. Instead, use positive motivation to facilitate – rather than force – the training process. The biggest motivating factors for training and reinforcing obedient behavior are food, a favored toy, affection, and social attention.

Here's the how-to

Generally, the healthiest choice for a reward is the puppy's own dry food, along with praise. Special treats are usually not necessary. Training just prior to the puppy's routine dinner is an excellent time, as the puppy's interest in the food will be focused. Initially, the food reward should be given immediately following every correct response.

As the pup gets better at performing the desired behavior, stop giving a food reward for less than exact responses, and only reward quick, well-performed responses. Once you reach your goal, continue to give praise for everyone correct response, but only provide the food reward on an intermittent, random basis. This will render the longest retention of learning.

Also, remember to use hand signals along with food rewards. A dog is more likely to respond to a double signal (verbal and visual) command, rather than only a verbal command.

Come

Teaching your puppy to come when he is called is quite simple. Hold a piece of dry food out between your thumb and forefinger, extend it toward the pup, and say his name. As he approaches you, repeatedly wave your hand toward your chest and say "come". This gives your pet both verbal and visual cues to respond to. When he reaches you, give him the food and, as he eats, quickly take a few steps back and repeat the procedure.

Sit

To teach your dog to sit on command, start with the puppy in the standing position. Hold a piece of dry food directly in front of his nose between your thumb and forefinger, and say the pet's name. Slowly move the food over the pet's head so that his nose points straight up. As the puppy's nose goes up, his rear end will be leveraged into the sit position. Say "sit" as he assumes the position and give the food reward. Be careful not to hold the food lure too high above the pet's head, or he will jump up for the food. After some practicing, the pup will automatically sit when you sweep your hand in and upward movement, even without food.

Lie down

Teaching your pet to lie down on command is easier if the pup is on a smooth surface, such as tile or linoleum. Begin with the puppy in the sitting position. Hold a piece of dry food directly in front of his nose. Say the pet's name and, with a swift movement, move the food down to the floor directly next to the puppy's front paws. As the pet slides into the down position, say "down", and give the food reward. This command usually takes a little more patience than the first two. Be careful to move the food to the floor, right next to the paws. Otherwise, if the food is five inches or more in front of the pup, he will probably stand up as he tries to get the food. With time, the downward sweep of your hand by itself will cause the pup to go into the down position.

Stay

The stay command is the most difficult for the puppy to learn. Young puppies don't like to sit still for very long and love to follow people. Keeping this in mind will help you understand your puppy's actions, and you will be better able to train him. The best time to begin training is when your puppy is calm, possibly after a long walk or play session.

Start with the puppy in the sitting position. Ask him to sit using a hand and a verbal signal, but no food. As soon as the puppy is sitting, lean toward him, make fixed eye contact, extend the palm of your hand toward the pup, and in a firm voice say "stay". Wait only one second, then return to your dog, calmly praise him, and give the food reward while the dog is still sitting. Repeat the command.

Many owners will immediately walk away after giving the command, triggering the young pet to follow. Gradually, you can request that the pup stay for longer and longer periods. If the pet strays from eye contact, calmly repeat "stay" in a serious tone as you lean toward him.

Once the pet will successfully stay for ten seconds at one step away, you can start working on distance. Slowly increase distance and time until your pet fully understands the concept.

Additional tips

- Remember that patience and consistency are key!
- On days when the pet seems fidgety and has a shorter attention span, keep the training session short and stop before the pup begins ignoring commands.
- Start the training in a quiet area. When the puppy's responses to commands become dependable, move the training to environments with more distractions. Be sure the pet knows one command before proceeding to the next.
- Tone of voice is important. When teaching "come", "sit" and "down", use a happy, high-pitched tone of voice. This will help motivate the pet to move. "Stay" requires a slow, deep-toned command.
- Avoid repeating your command over and over. If your puppy is not taught to obey on the first command, he will learn that it's not necessary to obey until multiple commands are given.
- Praise your puppy and say "good dog" whenever you are giving a food reward. This will reinforce desired behavior and help in training as the food reward is gradually withdrawn.

The authors, Wayne L. Hunthausen, DVM and Gary M. Lansberg, DVM, Dipl. ACVB, are practicing veterinarians and pet behavior consultants.

