

When Do I Start Training?? - Part I

Timing

The most important time in your dog's life is right now! His behavior is constantly changing. A dog that is well-behaved today will not necessarily remain that way forever. New problems can develop, existing problems can get worse. Dogs are social animals, but they are animals, and without proper training they will behave like animals. They can soil your house, destroy your belongings, bark excessively, dig, fight other dogs and even bite you. Nearly all behavior problems are perfectly normal canine activities that occur at the wrong time or place or are directed at the wrong thing. For example, he will eliminate on the carpet instead of outside; he will bark all night long instead of just when a stranger is prowling around outside; or he will chew furniture instead of his own toys.

Why Obedience Training?

The key to preventing or treating behavior problems is learning to teach the dog to redirect his normal behaviors to outlets that are acceptable in the domestic setting. One of the best things you can do for your dog and yourself is to obedience train him. Obedience training doesn't solve all behavior problems, but it is the foundation for solving most of them. Training opens up a line of communication between you and your dog. Effective communication is necessary for instruction. You can teach him anything from 'stay' (don't bolt out the door) to 'sit' (don't jump up on the visitors) to 'off' or "leave it" (don't chew the furniture). Training is also an easy way to establish the social hierarchy.

When your dog responds to a simple request of 'come here, sit,' he is showing compliance and respect for you. It is NOT necessary to establish yourself as top dog or leader of the pack by using extreme measures such as the so-called alpha roll-over. You CAN teach your dog his subordinate role by teaching him to show submission to you in a paw raise (shake hands), roll over or hand lick (give a kiss). Most dogs love performing these tricks (obedience commands) for you which also pleasantly acknowledge that you are in charge.

Training should be fun and rewarding for you and your dog. It can enrich your relationship and make living together more enjoyable. A well-trained dog is more confident and can more safely be allowed a greater amount of freedom than an untrained animal. Some people debate whether or not it is possible to train puppies. Others ask whether it is possible to teach an old dog new tricks. The answer to both questions is an unequivocal YES. Whatever the age of your dog, the right time to begin training is right now! Enroll in a local dog training class to learn the basics. Then most teaching and training can and should be done in your home.

How To Begin

It is best to begin teaching in an area that is familiar to your dog and with as few

distractions as possible. When you feel both you and your dog are skilled at several commands, then take these commands to different areas. Introducing distractions may seem like starting all over again, but it's worth the effort. In reality, who cares if your dog will sit-stay when no one is around? What you need is a dog who will sit-stay when company is at the door. Who cares if your dog heels beautifully in your own back yard? But you need to start there if you eventually want a dog who will heel beautifully when walking down Main Street. If you want your dog to be obedient in your car, guess where you have to practice? If you suddenly want your dog to down-stay while you are trying to move over 3 lanes to make an exit, you had better find time to practice those commands in the car long before you need them. Don't drive and practice at the same time. Practice while the car is parked or while someone else is driving.

When Do I Start Training?? - Part II

Training sessions

Keep the training sessions short and sweet. It is dull and boring to schedule tedious and lengthy training sessions. Instead, integrate training into your daily routine. Make training interesting and meaningful to your dog. If Rover insists on following you from room to room while you are getting ready for the day, then insist he have something to do too. "Roll over" for your wake-up greeting. "Heel" from the bedroom to the bathroom. "Down-stay" while you're brushing your teeth. "Heel" from the bathroom to the kitchen. "Sit-stay" while grinding the coffee beans. "Go find the ball" while you get dressed. Now "go get the leash" so you can go for a walk. "Sit" when the door is opened, "sit" again when the door is closed. And so on. Be sure that training infiltrates your dog's favorite activities such as eating his dinner, playing ball, being petted. His favorite activities should become training, so that training becomes his favorite activity.

Rewards

The single most important aspect of training is rewarding your dog for good behavior. Using food, praise, petting and play will help him learn faster. The more times the dog is rewarded, the quicker he will learn. Therefore, it's essential that you set up situations repeatedly in order for him to get plenty of practice at doing the right thing. It's equally important that you always praise your dog for good behavior instead of taking it for granted. It's easy to forget to praise good behavior because it goes unnoticed. But the very nature of misbehavior gets our attention. We don't notice when our dog is lying quietly, but excessive barking gets our attention. How many of us take notice and praise our dogs when they chew their own toys? But we all go berserk when we notice our favorite pair of shoes chewed up! Praise and reward are the most important part of maintaining good behavior and preventing problems from arising.

Reprimands

Some dogs feel they are constantly bombarded with "NO, No Bad Dog", "Stop that, get off, shame on you!" They tend to get used to it so the reprimands become

meaningless and are ignored. If most of our interaction with the dog is praise for good behavior, then reprimands will take on much more meaning. Whenever you find the need to reprimand your dog, immediately show him what you want him to do, then reward him for getting it right.

If you catch him chewing the furniture, you're too late in your correction. Watch your dog when he is looking at something that is inappropriate and say "Uh, Uh." (You must give him the information as he is thinking of it, not after he has done it.) Then immediately direct him to his own toys, enthusiastically entice him to chew on them and praise him for doing so. If done correctly, your voice alone is sufficient to stop the wrong behavior. Don't continue to nag him. Put him in his crate or make him lie down for 5 minutes if you have spoken to him twice. Never hit, kick, slap or spank your dog. This type of inappropriate punishment always creates more problems and usually makes existing problems worse. Not only will you have a barking, chewing dog, but one that is leery, hand-shy, fearful or aggressive. Proper training is hard work and lots of practice. But your reward is having a happy, well behaved dog who is a pleasure to be around.

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