

Dog Training – The Basic Steps

Part XVI

One of the most common questions dog owners ask is “When should I start training my dog?” Whenever I receive a phone call of this nature, I explain that an ideal time to start training a puppy in very simple obedience is when it is twelve to thirteen weeks of old. However, if a caller explains that they’ve never had dogs before, that they have just purchased an eight -week -old puppy which is presenting many problems, then I would advise them to come and see me straight away. Although they are too young to start formal obedience training, there is so much, I can do in the meantime, to help new inexperienced dog owners. Main topics would include: toilet training, general handling, socialising and conditioning to everything outside and to know how to correct any bad behaviour.

Usually, one appointment will put the dog owner on the right path until the puppy reaches the right age to start obedience training. I always welcome it if the whole family, including children, can attend. During the lesson the family can be shown how to walk the puppy on a lead and collar, socialise it with calm dogs, introduce it to people, talk to it in an interesting way, introduce it to strange objects and how to correct any unwanted behaviour.

Perhaps the most common problem puppies have is mouthing! Really, it is quite easy to correct! Let’s imagine you are sitting and the puppy approaches and attempts to mouth your left hand. Let that hand remain exactly where it is, take hold of the scruff of the puppy’s neck with your right hand, say, “No!” followed immediately with a quick shake and release it. The puppy will respond by giving a sudden squeak and behave favourably, where upon it should be praised quietly. You can take this one step further by placing your left hand in front of the puppy’s mouth to see if it will mouth again. If it does, repeat the correction —a little firmer this time. If the puppy doesn’t attempt to mouth, praise it. It must be explained to dog owners that the puppy, when it receives this correction, will know instinctively that that is a correction, because that is exactly how its own mother would have corrected it. So you need to stick as close to nature as you possibly can. The same procedure of correction can and should be applied in other circumstances like: the puppy chewing the leg of a chair, trying to dig a hole on the garden, or pulling the washing off the clothes line!

In recent years all sorts of ridiculous ideas have been thought up about dealing with unwanted behaviour. Unfortunately, a number of them have been explained in books. Because they appear in books, dog owners, especially those who have never owned a dog before, naturally believe that the methods outlined are correct and that the authors are experts. A similar thing happens when dog owners see advertised on the roadside: Puppy Pre-School. Wishing to do the right thing they sign up for so many lessons and take their puppies along in the believe that, by attending these classes, they will set their dogs on the right tracks for the rest of their lives. Regrettably, the clients sooner or later discover that those conducting the classes are not experienced and knowledgeable trainers, have no idea how to socialise puppies, have little to no knowledge of the development of canine temperament, have no idea how to correct bad behaviour and do quite the wrong thing, by enticing the puppy away with a piece of food when it does wrong like attacking another puppy. They don’t seem to understand that if that procedure is adopted the puppy is being rewarded for bad behaviour!

Another method shown to handlers is to fold their arms and completely ignore the puppy or adult dog. That is quite wrong. If bad behaviour occurs, then it should be corrected. Yet another so called corrective method is to take hold of the dog with both hands, one each side of its face, put one’s face right down close to the dog, look it straight in the eyes and yell, “No!” That has no effect and as soon as the dog is released it attempts the bad behaviour again.

For many years now all these methods have been reported to me by people who have come to see me in sheer desperation. They have felt cheated after having spent so much time and money in attending such Puppy Pre-School lessons without success. I know that everything they have told me is true because on occasions I have mixed with large groups of people attending these classes. Naturally, I did not disclose who I was! As I watched I couldn't believe it possible what was being explained and shown. In some cases I was quite horrified. I found it extremely hard to keep quiet and not show any signs of my disapproval. Some of the things shown were so ridiculous that I found it very difficult to refrain from laughing! At the same time, I naturally felt very sorry for the handlers who had attended with all good intentions only to be misguided by incompetent teachers! I also felt very sorry for many of the puppies who were literally being thrown in at the 'deep end' as it were.

At one Puppy Pre School I visited there were about fourteen puppies. From what I saw most pups were brought along with more than one member of each family. In theory this was good so that all members of each family could learn how to bring up their respective pups. But when they had all assembled in a huge waiting room and the doors were locked for safety, the person conducting the class asked everyone to let their puppies off the leashes for a free run. That was the first huge mistake made. You should never ever do that, especially in the first assembly where none of the puppies have ever met before and most were in a strange place for the first time and most handlers were inexperienced, for that was the main reason why they were there —to learn! Most were from various pure breeds and cross breeds. Their ages ranged from about nine to fifteen weeks. Even at those young ages, their temperaments and behaviour varied considerably. Whilst a few wanted to scamper around and play with each other, others were emotionally afraid and quickly sought security by hiding under chairs or behind their owners. Others were aggressive towards each other, yes, even at their young ages. In short, there was absolute pandemonium. Imagine how angry I felt. Never the less I kept quiet. I wanted to see what other stupid mistakes were going to be made by the person conducting the class. Well, there were many more mistakes made, too many to mention here. However, I did report my findings to the powers that be of that organization at a later date, but from what I have gathered since, my words of advice fell on deaf ears!

To conduct a class properly the person in charge should meet each puppy individually, then make a decision about two puppies, of estimated equal standing, being let off the leashes to socialise with each other, while the rest of the class retain their puppies on leashes. When those two puppies have been socialised well, they should be put back on their leashes again, and two more pups take their places and so on until all have had the opportunity to meet each other. During the socialising events the supervisor should explain to the whole class how the minds of the puppies are working and how the handlers should speak quietly in a slow voice in order to support their own puppies. If a puppy defecates or urinates during the class time, that should be considered as being quite natural in the circumstances. Such little accidents should be cleaned up immediately without any fuss.

Now let me tell you of a complete opposite procedure recently reported to me by one of my clients. She took her puppy to the first of six lessons in Puppy Pre School. There were about ten present. Everyone was told to have their puppies on their leashes sitting on their laps. They were not allowed to socialise their puppies at all. They all had to sit on their chairs for two hours while the supervisor gave a lecture. Now for handlers to be asked to hold their pups for that length of time is beyond a joke! My client said, "I might as well have left my dog at home in that case. The lecture was very boring. I felt I'd wasted my time, so decided not to return!" No refund was offered! As this subject is so important, I wish to continue with it next month. Cheers for now!

Michael Tucker

