

Dog Training —The Basic Steps!

Part XVII

Last month I wrote mainly about Puppy Pre-Schools. Because it is a lengthy subject, I promised to continue it this month. For continuity, some readers may wish to read my last article again just before they read this one.

So to where should dog owners go to receive good and helpful tuition to set them on the right track in rearing, socialising, conditioning and knowing how to create good behaviour in their puppies? The best advice I feel that I can give clients wishing to attend a Puppy Pre-School is to be extremely careful which one they choose. If possible ask others who have attended these Schools. Ask them how the sessions were conducted? How many were in the class? For how many weeks did the class run? Was everyone pleased with the way the supervisor conducted the sessions? Did he or she have the knowledge, experience and qualifications required to hold such classes? What was the cost?

Further important questions should also be asked: Were all the puppies let off their leashes to have a huge play in the very first lesson? If this was the case, it is quite plain that the supervisor doesn't know much about animal behaviour and the development of canine temperament. Therefore, I would strongly advise clients against attending such places. Were clients shown how to correct their puppies for any unwanted behaviour? Were owners shown how to toilet train their puppies? Were they shown the correct way in lifting up their puppies and placing them down carefully on the ground?

Another big question is: Does one have to take a puppy to Puppy Pre-School? My simple answer to that daily question is, "No! One does not" Very often it is best to allow a puppy to socialise with a , calm dog which you have selected as it comes towards you on the street or one which you have met in the local park. Meeting one dog at a time is far better than being surrounded by a group of dogs which can prove to be rather traumatic, especially for a puppy with a timid nature. By allowing the puppy to meet one dog at a time, it is then given a chance to gradually build up confidence in itself. I have reared all my own dogs this way. They have never attended puppy pre-school. I have always carefully selected the dogs I wish my puppy to meet. It is very important to support your puppy with a very assuring voice when introducing it to other dogs. If you remained silent, as many new dog owners do, fearing the worst during such a meeting, your puppy would feel very much on its own and it is, therefore, likely to show some fear. It is amazing what can be done with the human voice!

One of the obvious signs seen in a timid dog is when it tries to hide behind its handler. If and when this occurs, the handler should take the necessary preventive action by running the spare hand down the leash to the clip and manoeuvre the dog around to the front and praise it. It has to learn to stand on its own four feet. If it is allowed to get around the back of the handler, then it is simply seeking security. It then becomes a habit, a very bad habit! The longer the problem exists, the more difficult it is to cure. I liken it to a small child who is shy and hides behind its mother when she may stop to talk to someone in the street. Often the mother will say, "My child is very shy you know!" That is about the worst thing she could say, for it would only make the child feel worse. Instead, she should encourage the child to come forward to say hello to the person to whom she is talking. Yes, there are many similarities when bringing up children and dogs.

As I have said before, it is so important to socialise and condition puppies to the outside world at an early age. The importance of this is stressed in the rearing of puppies on the puppy walking schemes established in guide dog, customs and police dog work. If that puppy walking work is not done

properly and they fail their final tests, sadly those dogs have to be rejected. Those professional organizations have certainly set good examples and standards which I believe all conscientious dog owners should also strive to achieve.

Many years ago when I was employed at the National Guide Dog Centre, Kew, about thirty-five veterinary students from different States and New Zealand attended a seminar at our training centre. I had the privilege of giving a paper on the rearing, handling and training of guide dogs. Knowing that most of the students were nearing the completion of their veterinary training, I included a number of handling techniques which I felt would be invaluable to them. One very important point on which I offered my advice was that whenever they needed to examine a dog, talk quietly to it and stroke it gently in order to keep it calm. Also, not to look at it straight in the eyes if it showed even the slightest signs of being suspicious. That would make the dog worse. It is important to gain the dog's confidence first. During this time it is advisable to look to the side or above its eyes. Avoid direct contact with its eyes which can have an intimidating affect on the dog.

I also advised that when they need to examine a dog on a table, avoid having it on a stainless steel top on which a dog has difficulty to grip. If a dog starts to slide it is then very likely to panic, and the next thing that can, and often does, happen is that it snaps! It is far better to produce a rubber mat on which the dog can stand, have a grip and feel quite comfortable. I am always pleased to see that many veterinarians now have excellent tables which have slightly rough surfaces which can be kept hygienically clean.

At the end of the seminar many of the students gathered round and expressed their appreciation for all I had told them. I was very surprised when they told me that none of those important points had been taught to them during their veterinary training. They understood everything so well, and as one of them said, "It all makes sense, doesn't it! Many thanks!"

Recently I had to take a puppy to the vet for its third inoculation. She asked me to place the puppy on the stainless steel table. This I did and when she started to examine the puppy it started to slip and slide and become anxious very quickly, as I knew it would! Then I asked her if she had a mat on which I could place the puppy. She went into another room and soon returned with a very thick towel for which I thanked her and placed the puppy on it. Immediately, the puppy was quite happy and relaxed. Naturally, I explained how dogs can panic on a shiny surface. I think my explanation was accepted when the puppy's good behaviour was seen! A few moments later, the vet was more than surprised when I turned down her offer to the puppy of a special food treat! I explained that I always reward my dogs with sincere praise when they have done well. No food treats! She probably thought I was one of the 'old school'. Well, yes, she would be right— I am and I'm proud of it!

Several years ago when quite a few Veterinary practices started to hold Puppy Pre-School classes, one veterinarian said to me, "Although a number of practices are holding puppy classes, I will not. I believe that type of work should be taught by you dog trainers who know what you are doing. We are veterinary surgeons trained in veterinary science. That is our field, whilst yours is training and dealing with animal behaviour." I admired him for his statement, and said that we as trainers were always willing to help all dog owners who had been referred to us by veterinarians. Another veterinarian said to me, "Michael, I've never seen you train dogs and people, but it's good enough for me to see dogs, which I have referred to you for training, come into my surgery weeks later with greatly improved behaviour. Also that the owners feel far more confident with the instruction they have received." Such kind remarks are always highly valued.

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