

Puppy Behavior and Training: Training Basics

When can I start training my new puppy?

Your new puppy is learning during every waking moment. Every interaction with your puppy is a form of training. House training, household manners, and social experiences are all forms of training you do with your puppy from the first time they come home.

In some situations, puppies begin some amount of formal training before they go to their new home, such as house training, greetings, and how their actions can lead to rewards.



How do puppies learn?

Puppies, like all animals, learn by doing what works for them. They do what is effective, from their point of view. Puppies repeat behaviors that have a good result. If an action leads to a treat, attention, a toy, a desired interaction, or the ability to have fun (explore, sniff, or run), the puppy will do it again in the future.

In general, teaching puppies what to do through praise and rewards (positive reinforcement) is the best practice. You set your puppy up for success when you use management, supervision, and a positive reinforcement training plan. If you wait until the puppy does something you *don't* want, and then punish the behavior, it can lead to problems such as avoidance, fear, and confusion.

First, learn what your puppy likes, and then make sure she receives something she likes whenever she does something you like! It's a simple concept but can be tricky to implement. Remember, a reward or reinforcement is something that is desirable from the puppy's point of view.

Let's say your puppy likes attention and petting. Your puppy jumps up and you bend to put your hands on him, pushing him off while saying "off." He jumps again, and you repeat the process. From the puppy's perspective, jumping causes you to touch and talk to him, so jumping is an effective way to get your attention! Puppies do not act out to upset people or compete with us. They just do what works, from their point of view.

What should I teach my puppy?

The best approach is to consider what you want your puppy to do. What is the desired action in a situation or in response to a cue? Consider what you would like your puppy to do in the following scenarios:

- The puppy sees a person
- The puppy hears her name
- The puppy sees another animal
- The doorbell rings
- It is time to go to bed or have a nap
- You are ready to fasten your puppy's leash and/or harness
- You would like to brush and groom your puppy
- Your veterinarian would like to examine your puppy

Once you have a clear picture of how you wish your puppy to behave, then you can begin teaching him baby steps toward the goal. For example, when your puppy hears his name, you probably want him to come to the person who called him and wait near that person. This response can be trained using a combination of luring, capturing, and shaping. We will follow this example throughout this handout.

What is luring and how do I use it?

Luring, or lure training, involves using a treat or toy that your puppy will predictably follow to show the puppy what to do. Luring is useful for teaching new behaviors the first few times. The lure is usually faded away quickly once the puppy starts to show understanding.

The lure should be like a magnet, where the puppy's nose is attracted and practically attached. Moving the lure will move the puppy's nose into the right position, and where the nose goes, the body will follow. Treats are the easiest lure. Use tiny treats the size of a pencil eraser that are high in value.

Example: Your puppy is sniffing the ground nearby. You call his name and, without delay, hold a delicious treat right under his nose. When his nose is magnetized to the treat, slowly draw him toward your body along an imaginary line, delivering bits of treats steadily as you slowly back up a few steps.

To lure a puppy to sit, start by holding the treat in front of, and slightly above, the puppy's nose. Then slowly move the treat up and back. When a puppy's nose goes up and back, his rump will usually go down into a sit.

To lure a puppy to walk to his bed or into a kennel, the reward should be at nose level as you lure him toward the destination, delivering treats every few steps and delivering a final treat once the puppy reaches the goal location.

What if my puppy doesn't follow the lure?

If the lure is moving too fast or is too far out of reach, the puppy may lose interest or even become frustrated and try to claw at, jump at, or bite the lure. Make sure the lure moves at a speed that is easy to follow, that the puppy can always reach the lure without jumping or grabbing, and that you give little licks or bites regularly to maintain interest.

What is capturing and how do I use it?

Capturing involves waiting until the puppy is naturally doing a behavior you would like to see more often. When the puppy is doing a behavior you like, you “mark” the behavior with a “yes” and immediately deliver a reward, such as a treat or a toy. Training by capturing also teaches humans to observe their puppy’s behavior regularly, and to constantly be on the lookout for right choices. Puppies make a lot of right choices every day, though the choices may be brief at first! Watch for right choices, mark them, and reward after the marker.

Example: Your puppy chooses to look at you and moves toward you — without you calling him. When he moves toward you, call his name, mark during the movement (e.g., click, say “Yes”, etc.), then give a treat when he arrives. In this way, you can “capture” the puppy responding to his name.

What is a marker?

A marker is a signal to the puppy that something they love is coming right away (e.g., a delicious treat or a favorite toy). The marker needs to be brief, just a fraction of a second. A marker is different from general, ongoing praise or attention. A marker should be a unique sound or gesture. Some common markers include:

- Clicker
- Short word (e.g., Yes, Nice, Click, Good, Beep)
- Sound or whistle
- Thumbs up gesture



Markers can be used in both capturing and shaping (explained next) to tell the puppy when he has made a choice that will lead to a treat.

What is shaping?

Shaping, sometimes called successive approximation, starts with an end behavior or goal in mind. For instance, you might want your dog to learn to step into a car seat. During a shaping session, you mark and reward your dog for each behavior that is “on the way” to stepping into the car seat.

First, your dog might look at the seat — you mark and treat. Next, your dog might step toward the seat — mark and treat. Eventually, your dog will do other behaviors related to the seat: one paw on it, then two paws, then hop in and out, etc. He is learning there is something about the seat that has the potential to get him a treat — he just does not know yet what *exactly* you have in mind.

"Shaping can take time and can be frustrating for both trainers and puppies in the beginning."

Shaping can take time and can be frustrating for both trainers and puppies in the beginning, but once both the human and the dog understand the process, it is an exceptionally powerful tool for teaching complex skills and a great deal of fun for everyone involved.

Example: To shape your puppy's response to his name, you could initially mark any of the following responses when he hears his name:

- Stops or pauses whatever he is doing, without looking at you
- Raises his nose 1 inch off the ground, if he was sniffing
- Moves his nose 1 inch in your direction, on or off the ground

As the puppy becomes more proficient, you can increase the criteria:

- Gradually, only reward if the puppy's nose moves two inches off the ground or toward you
- Gradually require the puppy to turn his head all the way toward you and look at you before marking
- Gradually require movement toward you after the head turn

One interesting effect of training name recognition with shaping is that, typically, once the puppy understands the marker, he will usually come running to you for a treat to collect on his "payment." Running to you is convenient because it also happens to complete the behavior of coming when called.

What if my puppy doesn't respond to the marker?

Usually, if a puppy doesn't respond to a marker, it's because the training environment is too exciting or stimulating. Start training in easy places like inside the home, with few distractions. As the puppy learns each skill, practice that skill in new locations like other rooms of the house, the yard, or on a walk when there are no dogs or strangers nearby.

Eventually, you can practice when you're in the presence of strangers. A positive-reinforcement puppy class or puppy kindergarten is a great place to practice these skills, helping the puppy learn how to work together with his family even when there are distractions present. If your puppy normally responds to the marker by looking for a treat and has suddenly stopped, check to make sure your treats are a good value, that your puppy is feeling well, and that he is still at least a little hungry.

When and how should I use a cue?

In dog training, the word "cue" has largely replaced the word "command." While "cue" suggests a reward will follow, "command" carries the undertone of "do it or else". A cue is a word, gesture, or situation that tells the puppy a reward is available if she does something specific. For example, when the puppy hears "sit" and then assumes a sitting position, she can expect to receive a reward.

Cues should not be used until you're certain the puppy understands how to do the behavior you are about to label and you are confident the puppy is just about to do the behavior. For example, if you are in an environment with few distractions, your puppy is wearing a leash, you are holding a treat, and you have your puppy's attention, then just as your puppy is about to step toward you, you would cue "Puppy, come!"



Remember, the cue is a signal that a behavior is desired and will be rewarded. A reward may be a mark and a treat, excited verbal praise, petting, or playing with a toy. The reward can be anything the puppy finds pleasurable; the puppy will associate responding to the cue with receiving a reward. Always reward when your puppy responds to the cue.

As your puppy becomes more experienced, the cue will be a signal that a reward is available, but only for a limited time. This time limit will speed up the puppy's responses to cues. Adding the criteria of speed is an advanced technique and should be added when the puppy is more experienced and mature.

What if my puppy doesn't obey?

If your puppy doesn't follow a cue, consider these possible causes:

- The puppy is distracted
- The puppy is confused
- The puppy does not understand how to respond to the cue in the current location or environment
- The puppy does not understand how to respond to the cue on this surface (slippery floor, wet grass)
- There is a competing motivation (something else has the puppy's attention)
- The puppy is tired, over-excited, or frightened
- The puppy is physically ill or uncomfortable

Any of these causes can be fixed by meeting the needs of the puppy at that moment to help him be successful, or simply by pausing the training session and trying again later. Young puppies need plenty of guidance and grace from their people, as well as consistency so they can trust and learn as they mature.

How do I fade out the lure?

When you are luring, you use treats like a magnet to guide the puppy to the goal. With most puppies, you can switch to using an empty hand, in the same shape and gesture, to show the path to the goal within 5-10 repetitions. If the puppy loses interest, alternate between an empty hand and a hand with treats in it. Gradually decrease the number of repetitions where the hand has treats until it never does. Always continue to reward when the puppy achieves the goal. This gradual change is how to move from lure training to reward-based training.

When can I stop giving treats?

Plan to continue "paying" your dog a reward in exchange for work throughout her entire life. As she matures, she will be able to perform more behaviors for a single treat or reward and work for ever longer periods of time. Plan to use treats during every training session throughout puppyhood.

How much time should I spend training my puppy every day?

Training happens all the time. Whenever you're with your puppy, you're guiding her choices by how you respond and how you provide rewards. Individual training sessions for cues or skills should be no more than a few minutes long at first and can be done a few times a day. Teach quiet skills like going to the crate, going to bed, or lying down when your puppy is feeling calmer. Teach exciting skills such as to come when called or retrieve a toy when your puppy is more energetic.

What can be done if my puppy is too distracted or excitable to control?

Training should begin in a quiet environment with few distractions. The chosen reward should be highly motivating so the puppy focuses entirely on the trainer and the reward. Although a small food treat generally works best, a favorite toy or a special dog treat might be more appealing for some puppies. It might also be helpful to train the puppy just before a scheduled mealtime when he is at his hungriest.

If you feel frustrated or if your puppy is highly excitable or just not catching on, reach out for professional guidance. A skilled positive reinforcement trainer will help you enjoy your puppy even more, over time.

When should I start socializing my puppy?

Socialization should begin as soon as you get your puppy, often, at seven or eight weeks of age. Puppies naturally accept new people, other animals, and new situations during their sensitive socialization period, which occurs between 7 and 14 weeks of age. This period provides an opportunity for a myriad of introductions that will provide positive memories that last a lifetime. Puppies are eager, exploratory, and uninhibited during this period and it is important to take advantage of this enthusiasm. Be sure to protect your puppy during this time and ensure that all experiences are positive, fun, and safe.

Why does my 16-week-old puppy seem afraid?

As puppies develop, there may be periods when they seem frightened in certain situations. They may be suddenly wary and suspicious of new people, animals, or experiences. Signs of fear can include cowering, urinating, and refusal of food treats. Sometimes a short break is all you need. Avoid pushing or overwhelming your puppy. Always let your puppy guide the pace of experiences, especially during sensitive periods. Monitor your puppy closely and talk with your veterinarian as it is possible that your puppy is not feeling well physically.

Should I also consider training classes?

Yes, a good positive reinforcement-based group class is an excellent way to introduce yourself and your puppy to training. Even experienced trainers often enroll their own puppies in group classes to take advantage of this wonderful, varied, controlled, and safe environment to learn and practice new skills. In addition, you will learn how to prevent problems before they can begin, or deal with them as they emerge, rather than reacting to problems after they have developed.

Training classes for young puppies are also an excellent way to socialize your new puppy to a variety of people, dogs, and other stimuli in a controlled environment. Your puppy might also make some new friends of the same age. You could then visit these friends with your puppy for social play and exercise sessions.

Puppy socialization classes are most valuable for puppies eight weeks of age and older. If all puppies in the class have had initial vaccinations and are healthy and parasite-free, the health risks are low, and the potential benefits are enormous. Talk to your veterinarian about the puppy training options in your area and the ideal time for enrollment.

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