

Why and When to Train Your Dog
By Linda Michaels, MA, CPDT

Q. What are some of the benefits of training my dog?

A. Training the dog you love is one of the best ways to develop a great relationship with your dog that will last a lifetime. Additionally, training makes home life more manageable and fun for you both!

Some dogs grow up to be angels and behave as if they were just born that way. Others take a great deal of encouragement and training in order to become well-mannered members of the home and community. The problem is we never know which dog may need training and which one may not. For this reason, we recommend that all puppies and dogs be trained. Dogs need structure and boundaries and it's our job as responsible pet owners to teach them how to fit into the family.

Q. When should I begin training?

A. Many dog professionals today feel your puppy's need to acquire socialization skills as soon as possible is paramount. Early socialization to all types of people, other dogs and moving objects, will largely determine whether you have an enjoyable or a stressful life with your adolescent and adult dog. Your puppy's critical period of development is between the ages of 4 weeks and 4 months. Whether she learns how best to fit in with the family will depend in part on what age you decide to train.

Q. What do the experts and the latest research recommend about puppy training?

A. The Father of Puppy Socialization, Ian Dunbar, DVM and PhD, was one of the first veterinarians to recognize the critical importance of early puppy socialization and to widely promote early puppy training in his classic puppy training book, *Before and After Getting Your Puppy: The Positive Approach to Raising a Happy, Healthy and Well-Behaved Dog* (2004).

In addition, an article in the *Journal of Veterinary Behavior* suggests that puppies should graduate puppy socialization class by 16 weeks of age. Following your trusted veterinarian's advice, however, is always recommended in individual cases. The article also recommends that positive training be encouraged (Brammeier et al., 2006).

Q. What exactly is Positive Training?

A. Positive Training is an effective dog-friendly and powerful method of training your Fifi or Bowser. Positive Training uses rewards and affection to train your dog. Just as humans work for rewards, so do dogs, dolphins, chimpanzees and all living things. This was first demonstrated in research by B.F. Skinner and presented in his renowned treatise, *The Behavior of Organisms* (Skinner, 1938). Positive Reinforcement Training is based on the principle that dogs and all animals will repeat behaviors that have benefited them in the past. It works and dogs love it!

Q. I don't really have the time to train my dog. Is there a short-cut?

A. Not really, however you may opt to employ a private trainer for obedience lessons, practice sessions and socialization experience. Ideally, training is most easily accomplished with just three practice sessions per day at home of 5-10 minutes each. Once your dog gets it, you may start using the newly learned behaviors in everyday life. Most people find that a lifetime of good, family-friendly behavior is the greatest pay off they can imagine and well worth the time spent. Lasting good behavior becomes a habit and an automatic response so once early training is accomplished, life gets easier for everyone.

Q. If my puppy comes home at 8 weeks, how important is it that my puppy learns socialization skills within the most critical period of socialization that ends at 16 weeks?

A. Next to basic health care, it's the most important thing you can do for your puppy. It's not uncommon to see dogs as young as 16 weeks arriving in class who already have some behavioral problems. It is widely known to humane and rescue organizations that the most prevalent reason that pet parents give up on dogs less than two years of age is because of behavioral problems. We can now largely avoid these sad situations for both pet parents and dogs with proper remedial puppy training. Don't miss out on the critical socialization period in your puppy's life even if you don't care to take lessons or go to a formal class. Begin your own program of socialization with children, friendly strangers and healthy dogs in order to help your dog become the social butterfly she was born to be!

To submit questions for this article, or to inquire about private lessons or consultations from the author, please call 858.259.WOOF or email: WholisticDogTraining@san.rr.com