

My puppy knows sit: Training classes are important to puppy development

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With the onset of spring comes the onset of bouncing baby puppies. How you interact with your new puppy is critical to her development; in fact, the lessons she learns now can set her up for life.

You will need to decide where to take your puppy for puppy classes. Notice I said where, not if. Whether there are classes in your area or you have to drive some distance to find one, they're well worth the effort. Many owners on their second or third puppy think that whatever they learned in the past will be good for the new addition. This might be true, but it's important to consider how long it's been since you went to a dog-training class. It's also important to recognize that your life will have changed since your last dog was a puppy. You may have children now, or be an empty nester. Even if you have the same breed as before, this is a different pup with different needs.

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By taking your puppy to a fun, motivational class, you will learn things you may have forgotten over the years. You may, in fact, learn a whole new way of training.

Puppies do well with the social aspect of classes. If they're allowed to meet and greet others of a similar age, they learn how other breeds look and behave. Upon meeting a Great Dane pup or a Boxer, some pups become alarmed. They usually just need some exposure to other breeds to become accepting of new dog faces later on in life.

Even if you think your puppy already knows the basics, getting into a puppy class under the watchful eyes of experienced dog trainers will be beneficial. During the classes you'll learn the appropriate amount of interaction between pups and discover who may be bullying whom. It's always hard to be the parent of the bully, but isn't it better to discover this early and take steps to teach appropriate manners? Teaching your puppy on your own, in your kitchen, can't do this.

Which brings us to training with distraction. There will be many times when you wish there were no distractions, but learning to pay attention while other puppies are around is a great lesson for your pup.

The scenario goes like this: you take your puppy to class to learn training techniques and have some puppy social time. You go home and practise what you learned in a non-distracting environment, then go back to class a week later to use the distraction to proof the lesson. Perfect!

While teaching the basic training words, most puppy classes will also teach "settle," "leave it" and puppy handling. The recall (coming when called) can be worked on as a group so the puppies learn to go to the person who called, not to a random person in the vicinity.

Some schools offer other types of classes, such as Puppy Gymboree or Puppy Social. Many owners attend classes twice a week simply to keep their puppies learning and working in the class environment. This may seem excessive, but in fact can be a lot of fun for you and your new pet.

Yes, go to classes. You will learn how to teach your puppy some basic words; that manners involve more than a sit-stay; and that the bond you have with your pup can grow by leaps and bounds. You will also learn that having fun is what it's all about.

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