

Potential Brat to Perfect Pet

By Bonnie Beaver, DVM

The introduction of a new puppy into a family is a lot of fun; however with time, the novelty wears off and the newcomer becomes a part of the daily activities. It is now that the developing personality starts to appear. Most owners want their puppy to grow into an obedient member of the family, but things do not always work out that way.

When a puppy is presented for vaccination, the veterinarian has an opportunity to quickly evaluate the puppy's basic personality and to offer some advice to help the owners develop the obedient dog they picture. It is important to start these lessons as soon as possible while the puppy is physically small enough to restrain. Waiting for an obedience class at six months of age can be too late for some dogs.

A puppy that is extremely shy and timid is going to need soft and gentle handling. Loud voices and jerking are out. Most owners do not have a problem with this, although very dominant people may. This type of puppy may be a submissive urinator. If handled gently, it will probably outgrow the behavior, but if punished for this submissive act, the behavior will persist.

The dominant and aggressive puppy is identified because he/she is already growling at or biting owners who do something the puppy does not like. In the exam room test for this trait by putting the puppy on its back and holding the sternum. Dominant personalities show a long period of struggling, twisting, and biting. This individual needs a lot of work immediately so it will accept owner commands later. The lessons are easy and should be done by the owners at least once daily, usually more. Remind the owner that the dog will never be physically easier to control,

so now is the best time to start.


Play biting is when a dog learns how much jaw pressure is necessary to cause pain. If a puppy bites a littermate too hard, it will yelp and stop play. Owners usually try to endure the needle-sharp puppy teeth because the behavior is "cute." This gives the false impression that it takes a lot of pressure to cause pain. Instead, the puppy should be discouraged from biting people by diverting its attention and stopping play. Discipline for a normal behavior is generally not understood.

Chewing and mouth-oriented activities of any kind should be discouraged; although, this can be extremely difficult to do with some pesky individuals. A puppy does not need a large number of toys and the ones he/she has should be different than normal things in their environment. Old shoes are the same as new shoes. Socks with holes cannot be differentiated from good socks. Encourage outside exercise to decrease the amount of energy available for chewing.

A puppy must also learn to accept dominant behavior from all his/her owners. For this, the process involves doing anything the puppy does not like until the puppy tolerates it. Have the owners lay it on its back and hold it by the sternum until it quits struggling. Hold the muzzle shut gently but firmly until there is no more resistance. Bathe the puppy every few weeks when weather or conditions permit so it learns to tolerate that situation. Other little things include handling the feet and trimming the nails, manipulating the ears and tail, and opening the puppy's mouth.

Many children are bitten when a dog is eating, so puppyhood is a good time to train the dog to allow family members to take food from it. While the puppy is

eating, have the owners take the food bowl away. If the puppy growls or bites, the dish is not returned for at least five minutes, otherwise it is given right back. This process is repeated until the puppy no longer reacts hostilely. Children in the family should practice this procedure under supervision, before the puppy becomes large enough to harm the child. The same technique should be used when a puppy becomes possessive of an item like a piece of tissue or a toy. The owner should insist on getting the object, never giving in because it is "cute."

By six months of age, the puppy's attention span is long enough for the more intense training of an obedience class. Obedience classes can make the dog more enjoyable, but only if the owner is involved in the class. This type of training teaches the dog to obey specific commands, and just as important, it teaches the owner how to give the commands. 



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FEEDING

Controlling the pup's feeding times is also important. As soon as possible, get the pup on a rigid, twice daily feeding schedule. This will help confine most of the elimination to two periods during the day. An obedience command should be requested each time before the pup gets its food. This helps promote the owner's leadership position by reminding the pup they control an important resource.

Puppies are more likely to take an owner for granted when food or attention is given ad lib. Pups that are taught to say please("sit", "down", or"shake") before they get what they want are pleasant to be around.

CHEWING

PREVENTION OF CHEWING PROBLEMS IS APPROACHED THE SAME WAY AS HOUS TRAINING. First, promote the desired behavior. It's much easier to teach the puppy to chew a limited number of objects than not to chew thousands of objects around the house.

Encourage proper chewing by frequently playing with the toys, scenting the toys with a small smear of food, wedging small pieces of food into crevices of rubber toys and by teaching fetch. Everytime the pup puts its mouth on a toy, give it loads of praise.

During the puppy's first year, keep everything out of reach. If it can't be put up, make it taste bad. A small amount of cayenne pepper mixed with water or oil is a very effective deterrent.

Should you catch him in the act of chewing, give a firm, startling, "No" and then offer a chew toy. Follow with praise when the pup mouths it.

As for punishment, I firmly believe that no puppy should be struck with a hand or anything in a hand. The most important lesson every puppy should learn is that the hand is his friend. He will have hands reaching for him thousands of times during his life. We do not want any anxiety associated with hand movement that might result in biting.

The best way to show a puppy that a behavior is unacceptable is to give a loud, startling, verbal reprimand every time it occurs. The reprimand should only be given during the undesired behavior and should stop as soon as the behavior stops. It is also helpful to follow the reprimand with encouragement and praise of the desired behavior. If the owner cannot muster enough volume to effect a satisfactory correction, more volume can be added by simultaneously giving an abrupt shake with a can containing six to eight nickels. This will get the attention of even the spiciest Labrador puppy! Eventually the power of the shake can will generalize to the verbal command and the can will no longer be needed.

JUMPING

Jumping on people is the most common problem of unruliness exhibited by puppies. It can be a very easy problem to correct if all family members are consistent in handling it.

First, teach the puppy how to greet people by sitting. A helpful exercise is to hold a piece of kibble at nose level and call the puppy. When he gets to the food, slowly raise it over his head and ask him to sit. Praise and reward a correct response. Back up several feet and repeat. This teaches the pup to come when called, sit on command, and best of all to sit when it comes to someone.

The best correction for the jumper is a firm "No," followed by a blast from a shake can. This will bring it back down to earth. Wait three to five seconds and quietly praise the pup for having it's paws on the ground.

Another common behavior problem is getting on furniture. This can be corrected with a verbal reprimand and a shake-can when the owner is present or by booby-trapping the furniture with mousetraps which have been set upside down. Be sure to put Cayenne on the traps so that they are not chewed after they go off.

TRAINING YOUR PUPPY

We are all aware that prevention is the best approach to many serious medical problems. The same is true for behavior problems. The age at which puppies are being vaccinated against viral infections is the age at which they are the most malleable for training and personality shaping.

Many owners still think that physical punishment is an integral part of puppy training. They are always surprised and appreciative to learn that they do not have to hit their pet or rub its nose in "number one" to solve training problems.

A puppy will train faster, grow up with fewer behavior problems and bond better with its owner if the majority of the training is oriented toward positive reinforcement rather than punishment.

For example, when house training the pup, it is much easier to train it to eliminate in one area of the yard, using positive reinforcement, than to teach it not to eliminate in hundreds of areas of the house, using punishment.

BASIC PRINCIPALS OF RAISING A PUPPY

1. **DON'T TAKE GOOD BEHAVIOR FOR GRANTED.** The owner should actively look for desired behaviors and reward them. All too often the training CONSISTS of waiting until the pup does something wrong and then punishing it.

2. **SET THE PUPPY UP TO SUCCEED.** Don't ask for more than the pup can give. If you call a pup to come when he is barking at a squirrel, you've asked him to do an almost Herculean task. It's even worse to call a pup over and over again, because you have not only set him up to fail several times in a row, but you have taught him to ignore you. Most puppy behaviors are predictable. The owner must think ahead and take precautions, including a judicious amount of confinement, in order to prevent the puppy from failing.

3. **MAINTAIN A REWARD/PUNISHMENT RATIO OF 5:1.** For every time the owner scolds the puppy, five correct behaviors must be rewarded. Relying mainly on reprimands to shape behavior doesn't work any better with puppies than it does with people.

HOUSETRAINING

The whole approach to housetraining can be reduced to two main concerns. **FIRST**, teach the pup where to eliminate. **SECOND**, use close supervision or confinement to reduce the opportunity to eliminate inside. Then, maintain the praise, confinement and supervision until the habit of going only indoors is firmly established.

To accomplish this, someone must accompany the puppy every time it goes out. Guide it to the same area each time and enthusiastically praise elimination. If the owner also associates a command such as "Hurry Up" or "Do Your Thing" with the act of eliminating, These words will eventually become a cue for the initiation of elimination.

Accomplishing the second part of the plan usually requires more thought and ingenuity. Until the puppy has completed three to four consecutive weeks without eliminating in the house, it must either be under 100 per cent supervision or confined to a safe room or crate.

Crate confinement should be limited to nighttime, when the puppy sleeps, and for periods of confinement less than four hours during a day.

A leash can be a very helpful tool for housetraining. Keeping the pup on a leash will help it learn how to communicate to the owner that it has to eliminate. After the puppy has been scolded for eliminating in the owner's presence, it will try to sneak away from the owner in the house when it has to eliminate.

If it is on a leash near the owner, it will be in a conflict situation(wants to void, but doesn't want to get scolded). This generally results in anxious behaviors (I.e. fidgeting and vocalizing). The alert owner will recognize this and take the pup outdoors where it will eliminate and be praised.

After a few repetitions, it will learn that if it goes to the owner and repeats these behaviors, it will be rewarded by being allowed to go outside and void. This is safer than depending on the pup to scratch at the back door. If the owner can't hear the scratching, the pup may either eliminate by the door or scratch until the door is damaged.