

# First steps in puppy training

## Step I - getting the puppy's attention

The only way your puppy will ever learn to respond to your commands is if you can first attract his attention and encourage the pup to home in on YOU. A young pup will generally look at you and prick his ears up when you speak to him. It is vital that you are able to keep this attention in order to proceed with further training.

Once your puppy really knows his name, attracting his attention is easy. It is amazing how many adult dogs do not know their names. Their owners would not agree, but ask them to call the dog when he is not already paying attention to them and see if he responds. How many times does the owner have to call the dog's name before they are acknowledged (and how loud do they end up shouting?). Eventually, many people will resort to words like biscuit or walkies to get attention. These words, said in an excited tone get a response, so why not the dog's own name? The truth is, all too often, nobody has ever taken the time to really teach the dog that it's name has any importance, but words like biscuit are very important.

Puppies respond to almost anything said in a friendly tone, so it is easy to assume that they have recognised the name when it is jumbled up with a whole load of other words. Time spent now on teaching your puppy his name, and practicing attracting his attention is an ideal base for future training.

## Teaching your puppy his name

Several times a day, take a few minutes to reinforce your puppy's name. Arm yourself with some titbits and toys and put your pup on his lead. The lead is helpful to give you some gentle control over the pup's movements - should he decide that something else is more interesting, you can stop him from wandering off without having to chase him. You are in charge. Use your titbits and toys to attract the pup's attention, call his name, and reward him for looking at you. Next, hold the titbit up to your face so the pup has to look up at you when he responds to your calling his name. Repeat this several times and the pup will soon learn that, when he looks up at you, he is rewarded.

At the same time as you reward the pup with a food treat, also use verbal praise and tell the pup he is good. As you progress, the sound of your voice will be the reward, the occasional titbit merely a bonus. Repeat the exercise using a toy to attract the pup's attention. Call his name and squeak a toy, or tap a ball on the floor. Hold the toy up to your face, call the pup's name, then throw the toy gently (remember, he is on the lead so don't throw the ball too far!). Allow the pup to chase the toy, and gently guide him back to you to continue the game.

Experiment with different toys, treats and tones of voice to learn what works best for your pup. Always reward your pup when he responds to his name and he will come to know that that specific sound really is his own name. An example session with 'Buster' the puppy:

Owner puts Buster on lead, takes piece of cheese from polythene bag behind back, holds cheese between thumb and forefinger, shows it to Buster but does not give it to him, brings hand with cheese back in towards body and calls 'Buster' in an upbeat, happy voice. Buster follows the cheese and looks at trainer. Good boys, Buster, give cheese

*Repeat 34 times*

Future repetitions: hold cheese up to face, so Buster must look up at you replace food with squeaky toy, ball bounced on floor, chew tapped on floor etc.

Once you can be confident of getting your puppy's attention and holding it for a few moments at a time, you will be able to start incorporating recalls and positions into your training sessions.

## **Next steps – Teaching your puppy to sit**

*Why?* A dog in a sitting position is more relaxed and attentive than one that is bouncing around. The dog can pay attention to you and take his cues as to what to do next from you when he is sitting quietly. You can slip a collar and lead on, examine him and groom him easily from a sitting position. The sitting position is ideal for the dog to greet people. A puppy leaping up on visitors is cute, but a 30 kg muddy monster may not be so welcome!

*How?* With the pup on his lead to stop him wandering off, attract his attention with a toy or tit bit and slowly raise the reward above his head. The pup's head should follow the treat and, as the head comes up, the bottom must go down, placing the puppy naturally into a sitting position. At the exact instant that the puppy's bottom touches the ground, give him the food treat and praise him, but **DO NOT SAY SIT**

Repeat the exercise a number of times, until the pup understands what you expect from him. Some pups catch on very quickly, others will take a little longer. Once you are sure that the pup will sit as you raise the hand with the treat, start saying 'SIT' as you give him the treat at the exact moment he assumes the sit position so he can associate the action with the word. Do not be tempted to use the command before you are confident that the pup understands what you want from him. Remember, at this stage, the pup does not yet know what 'sit' means - it is just a noise.

If you use the word repeatedly while he is jumping around, he will learn to associate the word with what he was doing when you said it. 'Sit' could come to mean leap around and play, not park your bottom on the ground! Dogs understand body language far more readily than they understand our verbal form of communication. In time, you will be able to phase out the hand signal and use the word 'sit' alone, but do not be in too much of a rush to do so.

Get into the habit of giving only one command. If you have to keep repeating yourself, you are either not keeping the puppy's attention or he does not understand what you want. Go back to the beginning, show him again, and reward him every time he gets it right.

As soon as your puppy has caught on to the idea of sitting when he is asked, it is a good idea to get into the habit of asking him to sit and briefly attend to you before he gets anything he wants. In dog language, this is simply good manners. Ask the pup to sit and attend to you briefly before you feed him, play a game, groom him, put his lead on, give him a cuddle or proceed with other training.

## **Teaching your puppy to lie down**

*Why?*

This is an ideal position for the dog to be in while you examine him or administer first aid. A dog which is lying down is less reactive to what is going on around him and is far more likely to STAY in position should he need to be left for a few moments. An instant DOWN from a distance can be a life saver if the dog is heading for danger such as an approaching train when he is running close to a railway line, a horse galloping down a bridleway etc.

*Method*

Start with the puppy paying attention to you in the sit position. Using his favourite titbit or toy, hold the treat level with the puppy's nose and slowly lower the reward down in front of the puppy. On reaching the floor, drag the treat towards you, in a line in front of the puppy. The puppy's head should follow the reward and he will slide into the down position.

Praise the pup and give him the reward at the moment that he assumes the correct position. It may take a few attempts before the pup catches on and understands what is required of him before he earns the reward. Some puppies, particularly of the smaller breeds, do not lie down properly using this method. If this is happening, try sitting next to the puppy and using your legs as a 'bridge' to draw the treat under.

The pup will follow the treat under the tunnel and will be encouraged to lie down. Make sure he received his reward at the exact moment when he lies down. Practice and good timing will reward you both. As with teaching 'sit', do not use the command until you are sure the puppy understands what you want from him.

## **Teaching the puppy to come when called**

### *Why?*

Very young puppies tend to follow their people around, and it is easy to be lulled into a false sense of security that this will continue forever! Sooner or later you will take your puppy for walks somewhere with many interesting distractions and for the safety and sanity of all concerned it helps if you are confident the puppy will come back. Many dogs are never allowed to run free as their owners are afraid they will not come back when called. This is very frustrating for the dog and makes it difficult for them to express normal canine behaviours.

### *Method*

Your puppy will be eager to return to you if you make sure that you are the most exciting thing around! This is very easy in the house with no major distractions but can be a little more difficult in the park where there are other dogs to play with, or even at puppy playgroup! Enhancing your puppy appeal may involve titbits, toys and your voice.

Remember that your puppy's line of focus is very low to the ground, so don't be afraid to get down to his level - bend or kneel down and tap the floor, shake a toy or clap your hands. As with any training exercise, always gain the puppy's attention before issuing any commands. Have his interest focused on you and, once you are sure he is coming towards you call his name and the word 'come'. Lots of praise is needed every time the puppy comes to you, even when you have not called him. If the puppy becomes distracted before he reaches you, back away from him, making lots of exciting noises to attract his attention.

Do not be tempted to go after him - this will turn into a terrific (for the puppy) chasing game and he will probably win! Always praise the puppy when he comes to you, no matter how long it takes. Have the pup come close enough to you that you can touch his collar (this will be helpful in the future when you need him to come back and have his lead put on), and offer the food reward as you do so.

Especially while your puppy is young, he will probably stay fairly close to you on walks and will return to you regularly for reassurance. Take advantage of this, and encourage him to turn this into a habit for life. Whenever you see your pup coming towards you of his own free will, call his name and 'come' and reward him with praise, and a game or food treat when he reaches you. Let him go away again, saying 'good boy, go play' or similar, to continue the game - it's no fun coming back if you just get put straight on the lead every time

## **Key points for successful training**

- Training should be fun for both of you -incorporate training exercises into games the pup enjoys
- Keep the play/training sessions short but frequent and varied
- Before a meal is better than after, no-one works well on a full stomach, puppies included
- Remember to allow for titbits used in training when planning your puppy' s diet. They are not extras but part of his daily ration (pieces of dry complete puppy food make ideal training treats)
- Be consistent, Make a list of words you wish to use and make sure everyone dealing with the pup knows them.
- Make sure everyone understands the method of training and follows it.

- Make a list below of the words and hand signals you will use when training your pup
- *Action*
- *Command*
- *Hand signal*

**For example:**

- Pay attention -use puppy's name holding hand with treat up to face
- Sit - use name plus sit with hand in front of nose, raise hand vertically

**Other commands to teach:**

- Lie down
- Come here
- Stay
- Roll over
- Go to toilet
- Don't do that
- Well done/release (for example go play)