

Basic Pet Training Rules

Before we actually start puppy training or even thinking about it, it is important that we get ourselves in the right frame of mind. If we do this and know where we are going, we will be much less likely to violate certain training rules that may hinder or prevent us from attaining our goals. Additionally, we want to prevent ourselves from doing anything that may adversely affect the relationship we hope to develop with our puppy. In our article on Housebreaking, we alluded to the fact that everything we do in training can result in positive or negative effects on how our puppy sees us. We start out with the idea of making our dog more like we want him to be, but if we are not careful our pet may end up seeing us as something he does not want us to be.

Rule 1 - Always Be Consistent

The First Rule of general training is Always Be Consistent. There should be no exceptions here if you want the training to go as rapidly and as easily as possible. This relates to your actions and words. From the very start you need to decide exactly what you are trying to teach or control and how you will do it. If you are going to use a certain word or phrase as part of a command or in conjunction with a certain point you are trying to make, always say the exact same thing in the same tone of voice. This is important for all the members of a household or anyone else working with the puppy. Everyone that is involved in the training should know and use the same expression. As an example, let us think in terms of the "Come" command. It obviously will not make things go faster if you use the word "Come," your spouse uses the word "Here," and one of the children uses "Yo, Boy." All of this simply confuses the dog. Remember, we are trying to train him in our language; we cannot expect the puppy to be multilingual at 8 weeks of age.

Every time you give a command or are working on a training point, consistently carry it through to completion. Do not tug on the check cord for the pup to come to you and then become distracted and forget what you are doing. If you start pulling the animal in but then stop with him halfway to you, he becomes confused. The puppy is supposed to come to you, all the way to you. If you do not ensure that happens, the puppy may think that it is okay, when given the 'Come' command, to only come in part way to you or completely ignore the command.

Try to expect the same reaction out of the puppy each time. If you use any form of praise or reward for a job well done, be consistent on how well the task in question is completed before the praise or reward is forthcoming. If the puppy is supposed to sit, do not praise him if he only bends the rear legs a little bit. People love to praise their dogs and sometimes they are so anxious to do this that the animal is hearing a string of "Good Boys," but it has not yet completed what he was supposed to. Over time this tells the puppy that he does not have to sit all the way down but rather a slight crouch will do. The puppy will believe that close is good enough.

When you start training the dog on a particular day, think of the next few minutes as classroom time.

When children are in school, there is classroom time for learning and recess for playing. The same should occur with your puppy. When you start a training session, maintain a consistent training attitude for you and your puppy. Think training and not play. Work only on training issues and do them over and over. Stay in control so it does not become playtime for the puppy. When you are not in a training session, be careful of what you say and do.

In the early stages of training, never give a command unless you can control the puppy's actions. This is a part of consistency that many owners overlook. As an example, let us say you are currently in the process of teaching your puppy the 'Come' command. She does not respond every time yet but she is learning what the word means. You are in the backyard together playing with the puppy and children. It is recess, not classroom time. The puppy is off of her lead and suddenly takes off after a wild rabbit. Do not, we repeat, do not even think about saying "Come!" You know the puppy is not going to respond because her mind is on the rabbit and only the rabbit. If you do scream "Come," hopefully the dog will be so distracted that she will not hear you. Because if she does recognize the command but continues after the rabbit, the puppy has just learned that when you are not in control, she can get away with ignoring what you say. During the training phase, when the pup is doing something, and you are in a position that you are unable to control or restrain her, do not say anything. Rather move to the animal and stop or prevent her from what it is she is doing. In the above example, you have two correct choices. You can either let her continue the chase or run and catch the puppy. Do not scream "Come."

Along the way, you may make modifications in your training method but from that point on be consistent. You may find that certain styles of training work better on your pup. That is okay, but do not start switching back and forth. Just because one command is going slow, you should not change from method to method, hoping you find the magic formula that speeds up the process. This rarely happens and in the interim, the puppy may become hopelessly confused. We have found that any individual pup, regardless of the method used, may have trouble with a certain command but not the others. This probably relates back to some experience in the animal's past.

Rule 2 - Keep Training Sessions Short

The Second Rule of general training is Keep Training Sessions Short. In many instances, young children can become engrossed for several hours in a game, book, or television show. Successful kindergarten teachers can make learning fun and productive often for an hour or so. However, dogs and especially puppies, do not possess long attention spans. Young pups will not spend more than a few minutes chasing an exciting, moving stimulus like a butterfly or bird. They simply lose interest and go on to the next thing. The same is true with training, they burn out quickly and become bored. After that has happened, nothing further will be learned.

Generally speaking, most successful trainers limit training sessions to no more than 10 or 15 minutes regardless of the age of the animal. This seems to be a good duration for most dogs to tolerate or enjoy.

If this window of time is exceeded, the learning process actually starts to go backwards. It is important that the puppy enjoy these sessions. If not, they may resent the entire program. If forced to continue training after they have lost interest, this same behavior may spill over into future sessions. Keep their minds occupied and keep it fun.

Set up a schedule and stick to it. It is much better to train for 10 minutes every day than 60 minutes once a week. Plan to have your training times revolve around the pup's schedule. Do not expect the puppy to be a ball of energy and willing to learn if you try to work on the commands when it would normally be napping or eating. Plan your training sessions when distractions are at a minimum. If you have young children, it might go better if you trained while they are at school or in some way occupied.

There are ways to get in additional training time other than the brief scheduled periods and these extra ones can be very important. If your animal is doing something that you are trying to train him to do, use obvious opportunities to reinforce the command. A best case scenario would be when you are getting ready to feed the puppy. You have learned that as soon as the animal hears you filling the bowl he automatically comes running. As soon as he starts toward you, bend down with the bowl and say "Come." It is a free, cannot fail training session. Another example would be when you are trying to train the puppy not to do something. Let us say you are trying to keep him from jumping on people. You have learned that every time you first come home, the puppy rockets through the house and jumps up on your leg. Be prepared and when he jumps up immediately put light pressure on his toes (see our article on Jumping Up on People). Then immediately bend down and greet the puppy just like you always do. Do not say anything about the jumping as you two are happy to see each other. Whenever you can control the animal or know what he is going to do, it is a good idea to use these situations as a continuation of your training.

Rule 3 - Stay Calm and In Control

The Third Rule of general training is Stay Calm and In Control. This is where most people fail in training. By staying calm and in control we are talking about you, not the dog. In training situations you can never lose control or get excited because when you do you may become mad, lose your temper, and do something exceptionally stupid. Training should be enjoyable for both you and the animal. If the puppy is not having a good time she will not learn anything. Likewise, if you are out of control or are not enjoying yourself you are not teaching anything.

During training there should not be any distractions for the puppy to contend with. You should guide her through the command so that she does it and is then praised for the successful completion of the task. If you are excited or angry your puppy will pick up on this and not be thinking about the task in question. You have to be focused for the animal to be able to concentrate on the training. You will learn that your demeanor during training is directly proportional to the amount the puppy will learn. If you are up for this and enjoying it, the potential is there for the dog to make solid headway during the

lesson. But if you are down then the pup's potential for anything good coming from the session is also way down.

Carried to the extreme, if you get mad and lash out or treat the puppy harshly, you have destroyed any good that might have come out of this individual training session. You have also set back the animal's understanding of the particular command or act in question and put a black cloud over the relationship between the two of you. When you do something to another person that you should be sorry for, you can sincerely express your regret and apologize. If they are of a forgiving nature, the act or unkind words are forgotten. Unfortunately, you cannot sit down with your puppy and reason through the stupidity of your act. What is done is done, and you must work long hours to regain the animal's trust. You will need to take time that could and should have been used for training just becoming her friend again.

Some people do better in training if they use a system in which they do not talk to the dog during training. They teach the dog the command without using or putting a verbal command to it. We will go over this method later but if you tend to raise your voice when you sense that you are not in control (or in the process of losing control), this may be a useful technique to try. Most people talk way too much during training and for some this becomes a stepping stone to shouting and anger.

Rule 4 - Do Not Over Praise

The Fourth Rule of general training is Do Not Over Praise. In dog training, praise for doing something correctly can take a variety of forms. Some prefer to give a treat, others may use the expression "Good Dog," and a third group may only give a single, gentle petting action across the animal's shoulder. They all work because they show to the dog that you are pleased or approve of his actions. You said "Come," and the puppy came. You indicated for the dog to sit, and he sat down. The animal did what he was supposed to. Praise is important, but the animal needs only to recognize it as a thank you for a job well done. You communicate to the dog that he did something correctly and you are happy he did. If your form of praise is always consistent in method and amount, the puppy will understand perfectly.

Where many owners err is that they bury their animal in praise. Rather than say a single "Good Dog," they get down on their knee and let out a string of forty "Good Dogs." Instead of a single stroke over the shoulder, they give the animal a full body massage. Instead of a single small piece of a biscuit or treat, the dog is given half a box. All of these overdoses do the same thing. They distract the dog from what it has just learned. Too much of a good thing and the animal forgets what the two of you are doing. The command and his response are no longer reinforcing correct behavior. The entire incident may be lost in the past.

Rule 5 - Always End on A Positive Note

The Fifth Rule of general training is to Always End on A Positive Note. Every training session should

end with praise. The last thing you ask or command the puppy to do should be completed with the puppy doing it correctly. Someday, when things are not going as well as you would prefer, for the last command, choose something that is easy and cannot fail. When the puppy does it correctly, praise her and move someplace else for some recess time or relaxation. Ending a session on a bad note may continue into the next training period. You want the pup to finish one lesson and because of the praise, to look forward to the next session. Always remember that to the dog, praise helps fulfill her desire to please you.

Rule 6 - Forget Discipline (Punishment)

The Sixth Rule of general training is Forget Discipline. Now before you overreact, understand what we mean. To some trainers and most dog owners, discipline usually means to punish the animal for something he has done. To these same people, punishment usually means to hurt the animal in some way. In our minds this just is not necessary. If discipline means punishment or causes pain, forget it.

Let us look at the most common reasons people discipline their dogs. The most common one is for something the animal did. Notice we did not say "something the animal was doing." Rather, we used the past tense. People punish their dog for something she did in the past. Examples would be finding a stool in the house during the housebreaking process. You did not catch the animal doing it, you only discovered it later. The pup is picked up, scolded, and put in her crate. A second example would be if someone's dog runs away from home without them knowing it. Two or three hours later she returns, so to make her see the error of her ways, the owner punishes her. They use a rolled-up newspaper to give her a spanking. Neither of these animals had any idea what the punishment was for. They did not sit there thinking, "Gosh, I wonder what I did lately that deserved punishment?" Dogs do not reason. Just because they got punished, they do not assume they did something wrong. All they know is that their owners were mad.

Often punishment that occurs as part of training is brought about because the owner is impatient with the improvement of the dog. The owner is trying to push the animal through training too fast, assuming the dog should already know the command or action. Be patient, remember that with most training you are altering the natural instinctive behavior of the animal. The best punishment for an incorrect reaction in training is a lack of a reward. If the animal does it right she is praised, if she makes a mistake she receives no praise. If praise from you is important, a lack of it may send a message. Praise is positive reinforcement, punishment is a distraction.

There has to be a good way to communicate to the animal when she is currently misbehaving. And there are but they are not going to hurt anybody. In some cases a stern "No" is all that is required. You catch the animal urinating in the house, you say "No," pick the puppy up and carry her outside. Dogs understand a change in the tone of your voice much better than they do most punishment.

In human behavioral medicine today, a "time out" is believed to be an excellent way to get across to children that they are acting in an unacceptable fashion. When they act up or do something wrong, they must live through a period of "time out." This is a new way of saying 'go to your room' or 'stand in the corner.' The same method can be used for dogs. If they are out of control, barking excessively, or jumping on the furniture, they are given some "time out" by being placed in a cage or crate. A stern "No" may also be part of the treatment.

And lastly, in place of punishment we can simply choose to ignore them. When children act in a way solely to gain attention, good therapy is to ignore them. In some examples this also works for dogs. A dog might bark just to get a treat or to go outside. If you want them to have neither, consistently ignoring them will probably break the behavior pattern. If the barking does not work and they do not get what they want, they will probably stop the barking.

Most things we want to punish our dogs for indicate a lack of training. Rather than punish them for doing something you do not want, train them to do what you would prefer. Until that can be accomplished, a firm "No," being placed in a crate, or ignored will bring an end to most unacceptable behavior.

Be Honest - Can You Train?

Be honest with yourself. Not everybody can train his or her dog. Many people say they do not have the time but if they cannot afford 10 minutes a day then do they really have the time to have a dog? Maybe the issue is that they do not enjoy training. This is understandable. Training is not for everybody. Some do not have the patience for it, some cannot control their temper, and some simply do not enjoy it. If you think any of these describe you, then you probably should not try to train your dog. It would be smarter to use a professional trainer. Your dog will not care. In fact, it would probably prefer it. A good professional trainer will only help a dog, while an individual owner who loses control may destroy one. The owner may or may not physically injure the animal but may cripple the dog's personality and self-confidence. If you think you cannot handle the job, use a trainer.