

August 2011: Early Puppy Stages: Critical Timing for Training

Last month, we addressed the need for training classes for all puppies, noting that puppies go through certain critical socialization periods at an early age. This month, I will help you to understand those stages.

Puppies begin to learn about their environment as they start to develop and mature. The “socialization period” occurs for most pups between three and twelve weeks of age. They learn how to interact with each other and to play. During play, they learn what level of biting is acceptable, and what is too rough. Between five and seven weeks, pups become more curious and willing to explore, which is a critical time for positive interactions with humans. From eight to ten weeks, the pups will naturally go through a fearful stage, so it is absolutely critical to provide positive training during this time. The social skills are refined from nine to twelve weeks, and most pups will focus strongly on humans. Therefore, this is a great time to stress training and socializing. Dr. Ian Dunbar, a nationally known veterinarian and animal behavioralist, recommends that each pup is socialized with 100 people before twelve weeks of age.

At three to six months of age, pups will enter the “ranking period”, which is a time during which the pup establishes his or her rank among humans and other animals in the household. This can be a time when behavioral problems start to develop if the family has not started to institute training and boundaries. The pup will likely go through another “fear” stage around four months of age, so once again, positive training is essential. Pups also learn to have a “soft mouth” between twelve and eighteen weeks of age. Since it is essential for a dog to know how to inhibit their biting toward other dogs and people, formal training classes should be started prior to this age.

From six to eighteen months, pups are in the “adolescence” stage. During this time, the pup may start to assert dominant behaviors and challenge humans within the household if the groundwork for good behavior is not already in place. Many pups also go through a chewing phase as a way to explore the environment; however, this can be a destructive stage if the pup’s behavior is not supervised. This is the age when many puppies are surrendered to a shelter or rescue group, or designated to live in an outdoor kennel, due to various behavioral issues.

Training is much more than basic obedience commands. While sit, stay and come are important skills for all dogs, the social interactions and the formation of the bond with humans in the family are critical. While you can “teach an old dog a new trick”, it is much easier to positively shape a puppy’s personality at a young age. Ideally, start your professional training class when the pup is eight to sixteen weeks old. Commit to the care and training of your young pup to establish the basis for a lifelong relationship with your companion.