

The Three "S's" Of Puppy Training

The Three "S's" Of Puppy Training:
SHORT SIMPLE SUCCESSFUL
By Jackie Mertens

Acquire your pup at or around seven weeks of age. He needs to interact with his littermates until then, but should be separated from them by eight weeks of age. As soon as you get your pup, start teaching him "how to learn." A seven week old pup is very capable of learning. From seven to 16 weeks of age pups learn 'how to learn.' It is a very important time frame in the life of your pup. Use it wisely. Remember, puppies cannot learn anything locked in a crate or left in a dog run. Your pup should become a part of your family and your life.

Early puppy training should be done in small doses with bits of food as rewards-I like to use pieces of cheese (kibble takes them too long to chew). Hold a small piece of cheese over his head and say sit. When he finally accidentally plops his butt down, say good and give him the piece of cheese. This can be done about 10 times in a row or until pup acts bored or distracted. Actually try to always stop a lesson before the pup gets bored. If you do this two or three times a day, your pup will know the word "sit" in a couple of days. At this point it is situational training. This means that the pup knows "sit" in this setting but does not really know the word thoroughly, such as if he were outside and you did not hold a reward over his head.

Teach "down" using the same principle. With pup in the sitting position, bring your hand to the floor in front of pup and say "down." He will quickly learn to lie down to get at the tidbit in your hand-praise and release his food reward. It is good for your pup to know the "down" command in order to later lie down quietly in a holding blind or duck blind.

I like to have our pups wear soft leather or nylon collars on their necks soon after they are separated from the litter. After a few days of scratching the collar, they adjust to having it on their neck. At this point snap a lightweight lead on the collar. Let the pup guide you at first. Do not drag or tug at his neck. Eventually try to guide the pup or coax him into following you with praise, tidbits and rewards. After several days, the pup should be readily walking on lead. Encourage him with praise and food to stay close to your side. Keep his attention.

Take your pup off leash for walks in the woods or park. This will introduce him to various cover changes, footing, smells and sights. Have him wade thru puddles, navigate ditches and negotiate stairs. This also teaches him to follow you. Since he is in a strange place, he is likely to want to stay close to the only thing that he is familiar with-you. This helps bonding and establishes you as the leader. Sometimes, when your pup gets distracted, hide on him or change your position. When he discovers that you are gone, he will probably get a little worried and start whining or looking for something familiar. Now call and coax him to you and pet and praise him-this can help establish yourself as the leader and the puppy as the follower. You have become his leader and protector.

Have your pup fetch rolled-up socks or small puppy bumpers (paint rollers make ideal puppy bumpers - lightweight, soft and easy to pick up). Once your pup likes to retrieve, start hand tossing him "bumpers" and coax him to you. Kneel to his level, clap, praise and move away from him if he hesitates to come. Most young pups will come when they think you are leaving them. If you have an independent pup, you might start his retrieves by using a hallway of your house with the doors closed. This will limit his options. You can reward him with cheese for coming; but he may decide to drop the bumper and run in without it for his cheese treat. Don't worry if this happens; at least he is obeying the "come" or "here" command. If he does not come, you may want to spend a few days on the "come" or "here" command, using the treats as a reward before going back to retrieving.

Enroll in a local puppy class. This gets your pup out into the community where he can learn to interact with distractions and other dogs. Go visit several classes if you have a choice- there are good and bad puppy trainers. Choose the class and instructor you feel most comfortable with. These classes are often called KPT-(Kindergarten Puppy Training).

If it is warm (water temperature over 50 degrees), pups can swim at an early age. The easiest way is to wade into the water and coax your pup in with you. *Important,* do not toss or drag the pup in-let him enter on his own. If he won't go in, wait and try again in a couple of days. Maybe try playing with him and other dogs in and around the water. He will eventually swim; be patient. He may be 10 or 12 weeks old before he decides to venture in; don't worry, and don't force the issue.

When your pup is retrieving your hand tossed objects (3 to 4 months of age), introduce a thrower to him. Use white or contrasting colored objects that he will see on cut grass or flooring if you are indoors. Have the thrower stand 10 or 15 feet away, 'hup hup' to get the pup's attention and toss the object. Release pup as soon as he wants to go. Only do three or four retrieves at a time, then put your pup away. Do this once each day or every other day. Note: we do not have puppies retrieve birds until they have been force broken. We "force break" pups at 5 to 8 months of age.

Instead of trying to stretch the distance your pup goes on his retrieves, keep them short so as not to tire him. Only gradually make the retrieves more complicated. Have a little change of cover, run across a mowed path, angle a safe ditch or cross a large puddle of water (that he won't run around!). Be innovative-put chairs out that he has to run past. Also try having a person stand short of another person who throws, so he runs past the first person on route to the object.

Try to get pup to run at the object and not at the thrower. Note-If he is running at the thrower, then the thrower is too far away. Make the distance between you and the thrower shorter and lengthen the actual distance of the throw, so pup runs at the object and not the thrower.

At some point, a pistol shot can replace the "hup hup." It is not that important how you get the pup's attention. But you don't want to startle him with the noise of a gun. Our pups hear guns as soon as they go training with us. They are in our vehicles while we are training the big dogs; so they hear the guns in the distance from seven weeks of age. If you don't have other dogs that you are working, introduce gunshots at a distance, so as not to startle your pup.

When dealing with your pup remember the three "S's" - SHORT, SIMPLE AND SUCCESSFUL!

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