

Tips and tricks to tame your pooch

OK, we've all heard of the "terrible twos" that often overtake previously happy and contented little babies. Well, the same thing happens with our canine friends, just a little sooner than with their human counterparts.

Depending on the pup, sometimes around 6 or 7 months old a previously well-mannered puppy can turn into a terror. House-training accidents, chewing, barking, the bossing around of other pets, and generally unruly behaviors might start to surface. You might find your dog doing things he hasn't done since you first brought him home or even things he's never done before.

Sadly, it's during this particular time that many dog owners give up and give a dog away or surrender the dog to a shelter. Dogs of this age are among the most commonly surrendered to shelters.

However, with some work, you can get through the terrible twos and end up with an even better behaved dog. Below are some tips to help you out.

Start early and maintain consistency.

You should start working on behavior and obedience training with your puppy from the moment he enters your home. It is never too early. House training comes first, followed by basic obedience - commands like "come," "sit," and "stay." Even puppies who are a couple of months old can learn these behaviors quickly and easily. And starting early will help establish your position as "the leader of the pack," which will help when your dog tries to test your limits.

Find your puppy's weak spot.

It's probably going to be food, but some puppies respond more to praise or physical interaction with their owner (a pat on the head or a big hug). You need to understand what is going to be most valuable to your puppy when you want him to stop doing something undesirable and get him to pay attention to you. Digging a hole in the yard might be fun, but a piece of a hot dog or pepperoni might be 10 times better.

Develop a simple and consistent set of words

and commands that you use with your dog.

Use the right equipment.

Keep it simple and always use the same words. "Sit," "stay," "no," and "come" are obvious choices; but also remember "leave it" (for when you want the dog to ignore something or leave it alone), "no bark" (for when you want him to be quiet), and "drop it" (when you want him to release whatever is in his mouth). When your dog complies with any of these instructions, give him lots of praise and a treat.

During training sessions or while walking, make sure you use the right equipment to manage your dog. Such equipment may include different collars or harnesses. Your veterinarian or a professional dog training expert can help you figure out what is right for you and your pet. For more information about safe, comfortable, and effective training equipment, visit www.aspcabehavior.org.

Make sure the glass stays half full.

Positive, rewards-based training always works best. Negative or punishment-oriented training will make your dog fearful of you and lessen the bond you have with him rather than strengthen it. It could also lead to aggressive behaviors in the future. You want to be your puppy's center of attention and the person he wants to please and looks to for love and satisfaction, not fear and punishment.

Correct bad behavior

Many dogs of this age will exhibit certain behaviors that you want to make sure you correct:

1. Resource guarding or being possessive of food or toys. You should ensure that your dog doesn't get possessive of his food and that you can always get between your dog and his dinner. Make your dog wait while you get his food ready, seated and calm. When you put his dish on the floor, make him wait until you give him whatever your command is to tell him it's OK to begin eating. Then gently interrupt your dog's dinner a couple of times.

If your dog begins guarding toys, the best correction is elimination of the toys in question. Growling or other aggressive expressions shouldn't be tolerated and you should correct the dog with a firm "no" and then remove the toy. Once he has relinquished the toy in question, praise him and give him a treat.

We know a lot of doggie daycare facilities that "outlaw" toys altogether to avoid such conflicts and almost none of them have rawhide toys, as they seem to encourage this kind of possessiveness more than any other toy.

2. Tugging, pulling, and generally bad on-leash behavior. If your dog pulls when on a leash, don't pull back. Instead, stop where you are and let the dog realize that returning to you is the way to get you to move forward. Once he stops pulling and returns to you, praise him and give him a treat. That makes you the reward, rather than just the person tugging him in the direction he doesn't want to go.

If the tugging or pulling is directed at something like a dog or person, give your dog a verbal correction and walk him in the opposite direction. He'll begin to realize, "hey, when I lunge toward something, I don't get to check it out." Most dogs quickly understand that if they don't pull, they will get to greet the other person or pet, and if they pull, they head in the other direction. Utilizing the right training equipment can help correct this problem.

3. Jumping and overly excited greetings. While it's cute to have a 10 pound puppy jump on your leg when greeting you, it's a lot less fun for you and your guests when that puppy is 70 pounds. This behavior is generally easily cured by a verbal correction ("no," "off," "down") followed by a firm but gentle physical correction. The physical correction needs to be clear to the dog that this is a "don't do this" correction vs. "we're playing a game of push and shove." Take the dog by his shoulders and firmly place all four feet on the ground or block the dog by turning or raising your leg in front of you so he can't place his feet on your chest. Also consider turning your back when your dog begins to jump and ignore the behavior. Doing this repeatedly will generally end the behavior fairly quickly.

4. Aggression is never good. This is probably the toughest problem – outright aggression on your dog's part toward another pet or toward people. Because this is probably the most serious of dog behaviors, we recommend talking with your veterinarian right away; he or she can help assess your dog's behavior and make recommendations, including directing you to a professional, certified trainer. This isn't a problem to try to solve on your own.

If nothing else...

Remember the four most important things in training and caring for your pooch:

- **Consistency.** Dogs are creatures of habit and consistency is probably the single most important part of training. Make sure that EVERYONE who is part of your dog's life on a regular basis is part of his training. Don't let kids or relatives allow bad behavior. Everyone should participate in his training and understand what is allowed and not allowed.
- **Patience.** If you're impatient or stressed while training your dog, he'll sense it and it will make him anxious, as well.
- **Positive correction vs. punishment.** Your dog will never understand why you're angry, punishing him, or hurting him. It will just make him fearful and confused.
- **Love.** Show your pup love at appropriate times and make sure you give him tons of praise. Love and affection work magic!

When you have a problem you just can't manage on your own, give your veterinarian a call and they'll be able to help! Never be embarrassed to ask for help.

If you have any questions or concerns, you should always visit or call your veterinarian – they are your best resource to ensure the health and well-being of your pets.