

The ABCs of Bringing Home a New Puppy

You're about to or have welcomed a new puppy into your household - congratulations! Are you prepared for what it takes to raise a puppy into a well-adjusted dog? A big part of being successful is honing your ability to read your pup's behavioral cues so you can respond appropriately.

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Jan 6, 2023 • 8 min read

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- A new puppy in the family means learning to pick up often-subtle canine communication cues
- To respond appropriately and help your puppy succeed, you must learn, for example, his "I need to go potty" behaviors, and signs he's feeling anxious or fearful
- It's also important to know the difference between normal and aggressive puppy play, because play aggression requires special handling
- It will also be important to help your puppy learn human communication signals through proper handling, socialization, and training

When a new puppy joins the family, while you're falling head-over-heels in love with the little fluffer, you also need to quickly learn to "read" her behavior so you can respond appropriately and get her off to a positive start in her new life with you.

Each day brings new opportunities to learn little behavioral cues that will help you in your efforts to, for example, housetrain your pup, help her feel less fearful, or address play aggression.

Picking Up on Your Puppy's 'Elimination Signals'

Before you can expect your pup to tell you he needs to go out, you must have his formal housetraining well underway. The age at which most puppies can begin to learn appropriate potty etiquette is about 8.5 weeks. Younger puppies don't have the neurological development necessary to control elimination, much like human infants. They aren't yet able to control their bladder or hold urine in.

The first step is to find an outdoor grassy space you can consistently take your puppy to when it's potty time. Her brain is developed enough at about 8.5 weeks to begin to associate the smell and surface of her potty spot and the act of elimination. Not only can most puppies at 8.5 weeks start to make these important mental connections, but they're also better able to control when and where they relieve themselves.

Some puppies that are lucky enough to be in litters where the breeder or rescue organization has instituted early puppy socialization (which begins at four weeks), can associate being outside with relieving themselves, and may be partially housebroken upon arrival.

Housetraining your puppy is a two-fold process. First, he must learn to relieve himself in the designated spot, and then he must learn to hold his pee and poop until he's in that spot.

A young puppy needs to be taken to his potty spot about every hour, and always after eating, playing, and sleeping. It's also important to watch his behavior and understand his "I gotta go" signals. The older he gets, the less often he'll need to go, but no dog should be expected to last 8 or 10 hours without a potty break — especially a puppy.

One sign your puppy may need to relieve himself is that his normally short attention span is even shorter, and he seems distracted. For example, if you're playing a game with him and he stops and wanders off, it could mean he needs to go.

Another sign: he disengages from you and starts to wander off down the hallway or into a different room. Since puppies normally want to be wherever their humans are, a pup who's drifting off to a distant spot probably needs to relieve himself. Never leave a puppy unattended. Use small pens or crates when you can't directly supervise your puppy.

And, of course, circling and sniffing the ground are classic signs of a puppy who's just about to squat. That's why it's important to learn the earlier, more subtle cues he sends you, so that you're not scooping him up mid-pee or poop to rush him outside.

Signs Your Puppy Is Fearful

As you begin to socialize and train your new puppy (which should start on her first day home), you'll be able to get a sense for whether she's confident and comfortable most of the time or tends to be a bit fearful in unfamiliar situations. It's really important to pick up even subtle signs of anxiety or fear in your pup to prevent her discomfort from escalating.

A fearful puppy will often stand or sit with her head down, ears back, body hunched, and tail tucked. She might be unable to look directly at the "threats" she's facing, or she might expose the whites of her eyes (sometimes called the whale eye). Another fear signal is panting or yawning repeatedly for no apparent reason.

An energetic puppy who suddenly freezes in place is probably feeling fearful, and if she shakes her whole body as if to dry off but she isn't wet, she could be trying to "shake off" her fearful feelings after a stressful event.

For lots of helpful information, tips and tricks on how to help a puppy who tends to be fearful, check out my articles on shy dogs, submissive dogs, and anxious dogs.

Aggressive vs. Normal Puppy Play

Puppy play involves lots of lively behaviors such as chasing, barking, pouncing, growling, snapping, and biting. With all that going on, it's no wonder many new pup parents have trouble deciding whether their little guy is playing normally or showing signs of actual aggression. It's really important to know the difference, because play aggression requires special handling.

During normal play, your puppy may play bow (lower his head while raising his rear end), present his front end or side to you, hold the front part of his body up, wag his tail, zip back and forth, give high-pitched barks and growls, and spontaneously “attack.” These behaviors are fun to watch and participate in with your puppy — unless they become too extreme.

Little twists on normal play that can indicate a problem include prolonged, deep growling, a fixed gaze, stiff posture, and aggression that is situational or stimulus-dependent rather than spontaneous.

These aggressive behaviors may stem from fear, territoriality, conflict, or pain and should be evaluated immediately by you, your veterinarian, and/or a **veterinary behaviorist**. You can also watch a great **Facebook Life** on understanding puppy biting from trainer Susan Garrett.

In order to mature into a good canine citizen, your puppy must learn how to play appropriately, and you can help him in the following ways.

- **Sidetrack bad behavior** — Keep a toy on hand that will grab your pup’s attention as soon as he engages in inappropriate behavior. Offer him appropriate toys to mouth and chew on before he has a chance to make bad choices.
- **Give verbal cues followed by an action** — If your puppy is biting too hard during play, loudly say “Ouch” and stop playing immediately.
- **Give a time-out** — If your pup isn’t responding to your attempts to stop a behavior, put him and a few toys in a separate room or his crate until he settles down.
- **Don’t engage in aggressive rough housing or play** — Some puppies have a low arousal threshold and can become very assertive, quickly. Avoid rigorous or intense play with these puppies, which can escalate into more mouthy play on their part or nipping behaviors.
- **Use leashes and head halters** — You can use a leash indoors as well as outside to quickly stop a behavior. Don’t yank or jerk the leash — simply use it when necessary to gain control over the situation. Head halters sometimes provide a more natural sense of control than collars do, but it’s important to match the collar, harness or halter to the personality and training needs of each puppy.

Helping Your Puppy Understand Human Communication

Just as important as learning to interpret your puppy’s communication signals, is helping her learn to understand the signals you and other humans will be sending her throughout her lifetime.

Here are five things you should do to help your little one grow into a confident, well-adjusted adult dog:¹

1. **Be hands-on** — Touch your puppy all over, but never be forceful. Just touch and hold him gently, several times a day, and reward his acceptance with a special treat. Remember, over time, you’ll need to be able to trim toenails, clean ears and brush teeth, and that training and desensitizing begins now.

If he actually enjoys or at least tolerates these rituals, life will be better for you both (not to mention your veterinarian, groomer, trainer, pet sitter and anyone else who will care for your dog during his lifetime).

2. **Socialize and train** — This is the most important thing you can do right now to have a happy, adaptable, well-behaved dog later on. Remember, all training should be fear-free and positive. Introduce your puppy to people of all shapes, sizes, and mannerisms on a daily basis, at a pace that doesn't cause stress. Always let your puppy set the pace of exploring new people, places and things.

Introduce children, men, and women, and even people with hats or costumes. Don't forget the treats to make "scary" fun! (e.g., opening umbrellas and meeting other animals). A good guideline to follow is that in your puppy's first two months with you, she should:

- Be introduced, safely, to as many healthy and safe people, animals, places, situations, sights and sounds as possible (I suggest meeting at least three new living beings a day)
 - Be encouraged to explore and investigate her environment, including outside, daily, with supervision
 - Be exposed to lots of toys, games, surfaces, and other stimuli
 - Take daily car rides with you to new, unfamiliar environments
3. **Play dress-up** — If your dog is ever going to need a sweater or coat — or even a bandage — now's the time to teach him about them. Even if you just practice wearing a harness, it's an investment in his future.

Also consider introducing puppy to an E-collar alternative for potential future use after a surgery or illness.

4. **Make noise** — Expose your pup to loud noises and novel objects, like the vacuum cleaner, thunderstorms (playing sounds of nature via Youtube videos also works), the doorbell, microwave and the blender at a pace that doesn't overwhelm her. Show her these things aren't harmful and reward her only when she's calm.

Startling at loud noises is common, but with positive reinforcement your puppy can learn there's nothing to fear and recover quickly. Noise phobias are real, and you can do your part to prevent them.

The development of a phobia involves a complex molecular change that isn't well understood but seems to involve a shift in how an affected dog processes information. It's also important to note that noise phobia can be inherited, so it's possible for a pup to be predisposed to the condition if dogs in her lineage have displayed overreaction to noise.²

The genetic connection is so direct that if one of your dog's parents overreacted to storms or other noises, you can reasonably expect your pet will have a similar response. The problem is also known to be especially common in herding breeds, and an overreaction to loud noises can predispose a dog to other panic disorders like separation anxiety, as well as behavioral problems.

You can find a detailed discussion of canine noise phobia, including tips on how to calm your dog here.

5. **Go adventuring** — You and your pup will experience life together, but new experiences won't be much fun if he's afraid or difficult to handle. Take him everywhere you can for exposure to new places.

Arrange to bring him for a visit your veterinarian just to say hi and score some treats. Take him on errands to see lots of new sights and smell new smells. Make all the places you visit special with great treats or repeat the visits until they're so familiar your pup is bored with them.

Science shows that it's easier for brains to remember bad experiences than good ones, so make sure your puppy's brain is filled with pleasant, positive associations.

Once your immediate puppy socialization tasks are complete and your dog is on her way to becoming a well-balanced adult, it's important to continue to offer her consistent opportunities for new experiences, socialization, and training for the rest of her life.

Even dogs well-socialized as puppies, if not given regular opportunities to interact with other dogs as adults, can lose their ability to mix comfortably with others of their species. And while some pets are naturally skilled at dog-to-dog dealings, many others need regular practice through activities that provide the chance to socialize with unfamiliar people and pets.

Pacing exposure to new people, sounds and objects to your pup's ability to positively process the new experiences is the key to safe and enjoyable lifelong learning.

Sources and References

[PetMD](#)

¹ [dvm360, January 3, 2018](#)

² [dvm360 December 1, 2010](#)
