

Survival Skills for Pups

By Gary Wilkes -Originally featured in
PuppiesUSA annual

If a puppy is old enough to come home, he is old enough to start learning. For Tug, this translated into disciplined learning of a number of very specific behaviors and a general, supervised freedom to interact with his environment. Having trained hundreds of puppies for my clients, you might think I would immediately start on fancy obedience type behaviors, such as sit, down and come. If I were deciding only as a trainer, that might be so - but before I was a trainer I spent eight years working in humane shelters. That influence made Tug's schooling a little different than most. Rather than teaching him only obedience behaviors, I preferred to get him started with "survival skills" that would allow him to live successfully with people.

If you are having a hard time thinking of obedience behaviors as "fancy" and wondering how the word "survival" can be connected to puppy training, it might help to look at the broader context. In this country, millions of puppies do not survive their first year. Many of those pups are taken to shelters because their owners simply can't live with them any more. Of all those puppies, not one is released to a shelter because it won't sit, stay or come. The behaviors that must come first are a little more basic and a lot more important than precision "heeling" or "scent discrimination". The puppy who knows how to sit, but does not know how to greet strangers is unlikely to survive. The pup who knows how to greet strangers politely may actually live long enough to learn how to sit, heel and stay. To see how this perspective translates into a training program, here is a brief overview of Tug's early education.

Establishing some ground rules.

Start immediately: The first rule in our puppy teaching program can be summed up as "Do it, now". Behaviors that are created or inhibited in puppyhood stand a good chance of being a part of the dog's repertoire for life. For example, if you don't want your adult dog to jump on guests, it is far easier to teach that inhibition to a 10 pound puppy than it is to teach a 100 pound adult dog. The common misconception that you should wait until the pup is six months old to start training leads to a very risky form of neglect.

Pleasant and Unpleasant: The tools of the trade: Before you can get started with a training program, you have to have a basic understanding of how animals learn and how you can control that learning. Most animals respond to things they like by repeating behaviors that produce "nice things". The flip side of this

process is that most animals will naturally avoid things that are unpleasant. These two types of consequences are the primary tools you will need to use to affect your pup's behavior.

Positive reinforcement - Everybody's favorite: Loosely defined, a positive reinforcer is anything your dog will work for. If your dog pesters you to play ball, then playing ball can be used to strengthen other behaviors. If your dog is a chow hound and will do almost anything for a treat, then food treats can be used to strengthen behaviors. The same rule applies to praise, water, warmth, physical affection and the opportunity to take a walk. While we can all think of many things that motivate our dogs, we still must understand how a motivation can be attached to a particular behavior.

The most important thing to know about using positive reinforcement is how to link a reinforcer to a behavior. Few people realize that it is the timing of praise that tells the pup which behavior "caused" the treat. If your timing is off, the puppy may learn something other than what you intended. Currently, many of the most sophisticated dog trainers are using the sharp click-click of a toy clicker as the signal that marks good behavior. "[Clicker Training](#)" offers great accuracy and allows for a much greater proportion of positive reinforcement in your pup's training program.

Safe and Effective Punishment - Toss your pup a "life-line": While we would all like to teach our dogs with exclusively positive reinforcement, nature has decreed otherwise. Puppies and dogs possess some behaviors that simply cannot be allowed in a family setting. Dogs, for instance, like to fight over food. In nature, this process of fighting occasionally leads to death or serious injury among the combatants. Positive reinforcement does not allow us to gain real control over these types of behaviors. In order to stop a behavior in its tracks, we are forced to use a different tool. Inhibitions are most powerful when they are the result of punishment.

Needless to say, the most difficult thing for an owner to do is to punish a pup for unacceptable behavior. Our culture tends to consider pleasant things as "always good" and unpleasant things as "always bad." In teaching our pets, this simple rule tends to get us (and therefore our dogs) into trouble. For instance, ice cream is extremely pleasant for our pups and ourselves - and can lead to tooth decay, obesity and clogged arteries. The "pleasantness" of ice cream must be balanced with the unpleasant teeth brushing, scaling and dieting that is required to maintain healthy teeth, gums and arteries. Conversely, the vaccinations we give our puppies cause momentary and immediate pain, but help to protect the animals from potentially fatal diseases. This is an example of a small intentional unpleasantness (the prick of a needle) that prevents a far more serious and potentially fatal unpleasantness. (Parvo Virus). If we use an unpleasant experience, such as a spritz of water from a spray bottle, to teach a puppy not to chew electrical cords, we have provided a loving and thoughtful use of

punishment. The ethically minded owner will see the analogy between the spritz of water and the prick of the needle - both cause an immediate discomfort, in exchange for a longtime protection against a potentially fatal consequence. If we fail to connect an unpleasant consequence to a harmful behavior, our puppy may pay the price for our weakness.

Now that we have some basic ground rules, here are the specific "survival skills" that I chose for Tug's first batch of training.

Hugs and Kisses:

A significant part of Tug's early discipline included being hugged, kissed, petted and fussed over by anyone who was willing to do it. Though learning to accept human affection may appear automatic, it is actually a learned skill. In contrast to traditional views of obedience, I think accepting and giving "love" is about as important as "come" and far more important than "stay." While it is possible for a dog to go through life and never really know how to "sit", "stay", or "Heel" it is next to impossible for a dog to live happily without a sincere joy of human attention. Owning an adult dog who genuinely loves people is not something that should be left to chance.

One Dog Night

Another thing that we taught Tug right away, was how to lie quietly and go to sleep -- on a bed. While many trainers suggest that this should never be done because it leads to aggression and dominance, an examination of the facts doesn't support that conclusion. Many millions of dogs sleep in their masters' beds without a hint of dominance or aggression - unless you term "stealing the covers" as a form of passive aggression. Frankly, one of the most common "rites of passage" for children is the age at which their dog can sleep with them. To suggest that the mere possibility of aggression should cause us to totally prohibit a pleasant and mentally healthy activity is an over statement of the risk. If we carry that logic further, it would be like suggesting that because a handful of dogs viciously guard their food we must stop feeding them. The most likely way to reduce any form of aggression is to teach polite behavior while the pup is still young, whether it is sleeping in the family bed or allowing people to take food, bones and toys away from him.

Nails -There is one grooming task that defeats more pet owners than any other - nail trimming. One of the reasons nail trimming is so difficult is that it can be painful and uncomfortable for the pup. We started Tug's nail training within a couple days of arriving home. I gently but firmly held a paw, while nipping off the tiniest bit of a nail. After each clip, he received a small treat. While most dogs will forever show some irritation with nail trimming, the early association of nail trims with treats may make the experience more tolerable for both of you. If you have

never tried to trim a dog's nails, have your veterinarian give you a short course in nail trimming before you launch your career as a pet manicurist.

What's in a Name? While humans can understand that a name means identity, dogs have a slightly more primitive take on the process of name calling. For instance, we decided to name our puppy "Tug" in memory of a dog we knew many years ago. Tug doesn't realize that his name describes a type of boat, or an action verb that relates to pulling on a rope or leash. He merely knows that "Tug" means "stop, look toward the source of the sound and wait for instructions."

To teach your dog his or her name, follow this simple process:

- 1) Wait until the pup is looking away from you.
- 2) Say the pup's name in a normal tone of voice, just loud enough so that you're sure the puppy can hear you.
- 3) As the puppy looks back to investigate that noise, say "Good" and offer him a food treat.

Repeat as needed. Do not say good, or give treats if the puppy approaches you after you have called his name. The behavior specifically means STOP - Look Listen. It does not mean "Come."

Whatcha Doin? Absolutely nothin'! The next thing we decided to work on, was teaching Tug to do nothing at all. This may also seem like a pretty nebulous behavior, but in our house it is a necessity. Because we run a business from our home, Michele and I both wanted a dog who would curl up and snooze during working hours, lie still in the hallway as we zipped past to answer telephones and stay inside the house even when delivery men brought in boxes of video tapes. The place where Tug started his "nothin" training was in the artificial "cave" where my feet are supposed to be, on my roll-top desk. This not only allowed me to watch him closely, but was one of those heartwarming bonuses of having a puppy. Sleeping comfortably under the desk also made it incredibly easy to teach him to sleep in a crate - one of the best aids for teaching houstraining.

Leashes? We don't need no stinkin' leashes! Because my dog is occasionally required to work in public, off leash, I used "Click & Treat® Training", my "hands off" method of dog training, to create consistent performance at a distance. The first real area for training was along the canal, behind our house. Because the weather in Phoenix is so nice, the canal banks

are packed with joggers, motor bikes and a large population of geese and ducks. Tug had to learn to take my directions even in the face of a nice big fat old hissing goose or a zooming motor bike. The vast majority of his lessons were taught with food treats, affection, praise and all sorts of positive reinforcements. Once the behaviors were firmly established, I let him know that they were no longer optional. To balance the dominant influence of positive reinforcement, I used safe, harmless and effective punishment on very rare occasions for failure to perform a behavior. My primary tools were scolding, a squirt bottle full of water and a variety of soft, thrown objects, such as small pillows or rolled up towels. The key to punishment is to use it very cautiously, with methods that can't possibly do any physical harm. While it is nice to have "off leash" control, your pup still needs to learn to walk correctly on a leash and to work in the presence of other dogs. To augment your off-lead training, there are many "puppy kindergarten" classes that can help you build a firm foundation and socialize your puppy at the same time.

The Life of the Potty. Because I expected Tug to live in a house, I decided to teach him to eliminate outdoors. The tools for good housetraining are:

- 1) Food treats for correct elimination
- 2) Limited confinement to a crate, laundry room or bathroom when you can't watch the pup
- 3) Regular trips outdoors
- 4) Scheduled/regulated meals and snacks
- 5) Restrict playtime to outdoor areas as much as possible.
- 6) No Punishment for accident

Stop!! In the name of love! While much of a puppy's early learning can be taught with positive reinforcement, there are some very natural canine behaviors that need to be controlled or eliminated. High on my list of objectionable behaviors were biting, jumping and wandering out the front door. Australian Cattle Dogs are wonderfully adapted as herding dogs, and are notorious for nipping at the heels of people when cows are unavailable. Since we have no cows, and being herded while sprinting to answer the phone can be awkward, I needed to discourage that behavior immediately. The secret of using firm, but safe punishment is to make sure your methods are very precise and cannot injure your pup, even accidentally. In order to correctly apply such

methods, we must give some further attention to the process of eliminating behaviors.

To show you how safe punishment works, imagine that your Great Aunt Martha, is coming to visit you. When she walks in the front door, your puppy starts leaping up and biting at the hem of Martha's dress. This is plainly unacceptable behavior that you need to control, quickly. Instead of making a big deal of the experience, you pick up the puppy and slip him in his crate for awhile. With a little preparation, you set up a repeat greeting by asking Martha to stand outside the front door and ring the bell. This time, the sequence changes considerably. When the puppy darts forward to leap for the hem, you say the word NO! and toss a small throw pillow at the puppy - coincidentally this procedure is similar to the one Great Aunt Martha used to teach you to stay out of the cookie jar. The pillow startles the pup and causes him to reconsider the attractiveness of skirt hems. You ask Aunt Martha to humor you one more time and she steps outside to repeat the event. This time, as she enters the house, the puppy stands back and hesitates for a second. That's your cue to pour on the praise, affection and treats. You are positively reinforcing the puppy's new, sedate behavior. The goal is to make all hem biting disappear while retaining an overall pleasant relationship between Aunt Martha and the pup.

Soon after the skirt experience, when you are at work, a letter carrier stops by to deliver a registered package. Aunt Martha is in the living room, dusting the furniture, while the puppy is still skeptically eyeing her skirts. At the sound of the doorbell, Martha opens the door. The puppy sees a means of getting to the real world and bolts forward. Aunt Martha notices the puppy trying to slip out the door and pitches a fit. She yells "NO!", exactly as you did, before the puppy gets to the door, thereby scaring the heck out of both the puppy and the letter carrier. As the puppy freezes, she pitches her dust cloth in the pup's general direction. The puppy remembers yesterday's throw pillow and quickly retreats into the hallway. Now the pup is about 15 feet away from the door and shows no signs of coming any closer. After signing for the package, Martha closes the door and pulls a treat from her apron pocket to reinforce the pup's new behavior. Once the pup believes that ALL people are capable of saying "NO" and that strange soft projectiles start flying whenever he hears that word, he will abandon behaviors even more rapidly. By the end of the week, the puppy is starting to automatically go to his place in the hall when he hears the door bell. Aunt Martha starts stashing a treat in her apron pocket to give to the puppy for successfully ignoring the open door. Within a few repetitions, the pup eagerly anticipated the treat at the end of the sequence rather than the initial opportunity to run out the door. While many people think that punishment will solve their problems, it is almost never appropriate to use punishment unless you are willing to follow it up with lots of positive reinforcement for correct behavior. My rule of thumb is "you aren't finished until the dog's tail is wagging again."

The Long Haul: Raising a puppy often requires a new examination of your lifestyle. If your puppy sleeps in your bed, you must be willing to live with dog hairs and warm bodies. Failing to teach your dog to walk on a leash may prevent you from taking your dog in public. Allowing your dog to run loose takes the chance of an auto accident or unexpected dog-fight. While many books, videos and articles offer valuable advice about puppy raising, ultimately your individual goals and desires will be the ruling force behind your pup's education. Whether you raise a puppy that you can be proud of, or a catastrophe waiting to happen, is largely dependent on how you control your pup's education. Whatever you decide in the way of canine learning, there is one thing that you cannot avoid - the time to start is now.

SIDEBARS

How to stop biting - There are any number of ways to get a puppy to stop biting. One fashionable technique requires that you yell "ouch" as the pup clamps down on your finger, ear lobe, cheek or ankle and then stop playing with the puppy for awhile. This is supposed to let the puppy know that he has injured you and allegedly imitates the way pups teach each other to bite softly. Having seen a few thousand pups go by, I think this is mostly wishful thinking. A closer look at the way pups REALLY play will set the record straight.

Pretend that two puppies, Baby Fido and Baby Rover are romping and playing. In the middle of the frenzy, Baby Fido bites Baby Rover pretty hard. Baby Rover does indeed let out a whoop. However, Baby Rover's reaction is slightly more pointed than merely cutting off play-time for awhile. About a millisecond after the yip, Baby Rover will haul off and bite the heck out of Baby Fido. This effectively teaches Baby Fido that biting Baby Rover too hard has a very serious consequence. If Fido has a similar experience when he plays with Baby Fifi and Baby Spot, Baby Fido is likely to carry the lesson along for life.

The most likely reason dogs learn to not bite each other is because when a dog bites another dog, the bitten dog bites back. The best way to imitate the natural way dogs learn is not to yell "ouch", but to metaphorically "bite back" in the form of a safe and effective punishment for biting. The particular type of punishment you use must be appropriate for the puppy. If you have a tiny Yorkie that weighs less than a pound, a spritz from a small squirt gun is probably all you will need. If you have a 20 pound, 12 week old Chesapeake Bay Retriever, you may need to use a standard size throw pillow. The purpose of the punisher is to teach the dog one simple statement -- biting people causes unpleasant consequences. In order to make the connection between the biting and the spritz or bonk, you must use a signal that connects the two together - a signal like "No." Here's the sequence to stop the biting - make sure you do it in exactly the order listed, or it won't work.

- 1) Place the spritzer or bonker in a place where it is not easily noticeable. If you make the "punisher" an obvious part of the environment, your pup will only be good when the spritzer or bonker is visible.
- 2) Start playing with the puppy in a manner that would normally cause a bite.
- 3) At the instant you see the pup's mouth open, say "No!" with some emphasis. (It isn't necessary to scream it, merely to make it a little punchier than a normal conversational tone.)
- 4) Spritz or bonk the puppy. Whether you are using a spray bottle, water gun or throw pillow, hide the punisher behind your back before you start playing with the pup.
- 5) Wait for about 10 seconds and repeat steps 1-3 again. Repeat as necessary until the pup will still play, but completely stops trying to bite you.