

Puppy Training

By Michelle Posage, DVM



I ran into a former student a few weeks ago. This person brought his puppy to “kindergarten” classes at our animal hospital.

After a few pleasantries, I inquired about his dog, hoping to hear how obedient and socially well-adjusted he was. Instead, this nice man accused me of spoiling his dog. I smiled, despite my sinking ego, and asked him for an explanation.

It seems that this dog was friendly and extremely obedient, but only when he was being offered a treat. When there was no food to be had, this little dog did exactly what he pleased and got his way.

It was clear to me what happened. In fact the puppy class was a success, but this dog owner made the common mistake of ending his puppy’s education too early.

As a veterinarian who treats pets with serious and sometimes life-threatening behavior problems, I designed a special obedience class a few years ago just for young puppies. Similar to kindergarten for children, our puppy class is an introduction to schooling. It is a fun opportunity to start basic obedience techniques and to socialize puppies in a safe setting, at a time in a dog’s life when training has the largest impact. Puppies less than six-months old are as eager to learn as their owners are to teach them.

Because kindergarten is a puppy’s first experience with group training, and because puppies at this age have a short attention span, we feed lots of treats during class. The food is used to help the puppies to focus, to lure them into a certain behavior, and to reward compliance. Praise and toys also work as training tools, but nothing beats a tasty tidbit when you are teaching puppies.

By the end of a seven-week course, the puppies have been introduced to at least six different obedience commands and a number of different socialization exercises. The puppy owners have learned how to communicate with their dogs and how to work through common behavior problems. They have developed a healthy bond – a platform for a successful relationship. None of these dogs would win an obedience competition, but no one should expect to be accepted into Harvard upon graduating from kindergarten.

What happened to my accusatory student is something I see often; the puppy’s (and the owner’s) progress ended when he graduated from kindergarten. Training must go on throughout a dog’s life, especially until the reach behavioral maturity at two years of age. Using food is a great way to start the learning process, but a dog should then learn to obey without food.

Here are some tips I often share with dog owners struggling with food-dependent obedience:

- Receive your dog’s respect. Start by making him earn your attention by following a command.
- Keep dog treats in your pocket. You want your dog to think that a food reward is a possibility at any time, regardless of a trip to the treat jar or not.
- Be spontaneous. Reward obedience on an unpredictable schedule. By being fickle, your dog will pay close attention as he tries to predict when the food is coming.
- Phase out the food, but still give jackpots. No one would ever put their money into a slot machine unless they got rewarded every once and awhile. Give a jackpot of treats sporadically to keep your dog.
- Sign your dog up for a “clicker training” obedience class. Clicker training is a method of positive training using a noise to mark desirable behavior.

Using food for training is not the same as spoiling a dog. When used correctly, food can be a powerful motivator and a useful training tool. Just be sure to continue your dog’s education until he learns how to obey without the treat.

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