

The Puppy has Arrived!

A young girl with blonde hair, wearing a yellow sweater, is lying on an orange carpet and smiling at a white puppy. A young boy with brown hair, wearing a black and white striped shirt, is lying on his side next to the puppy, resting his head on his hand. The background shows a wooden staircase and a red curtain.

It is always a great event when a puppy arrives in its new home. However, integrating a puppy into the household is not always easy and if you are to get the most out of your relationship with your new pet there are some very important things to remember. The first weeks of life together will set the pattern for your pet's behaviour in future years and will lay the foundation for the relationship between you.

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In order to avoid problems of miscommunication and misunderstanding it is important to appreciate that:

- *Dogs are not human beings and they do not have the same range of intellectual and emotional capacities as us.*

But equally:

- *Dogs are not machines, which are devoid of feeling and of understanding.*

Your puppy is a living creature with a range of behavioural needs and natural communication methods, which differ from our own.

In their natural environment, dogs live in groups with complex hierarchical social rules. The relationships between individuals are dynamic and applying strict principles of hierarchy can sometimes be misleading.

The first few weeks of life are crucial in terms of development and at this age puppies will learn social rituals which enable them to forge individual bonds with other members of the pack and which lead to an overall harmony and stability within the group. They will form attachments to their mother and their littermates, which give them a secure social basis from which to learn how to control their own behaviour and to interact successfully with their environment.

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Canine communication involves all of the senses (sight, smell, taste, hearing and touch) and dogs use a blend of instinctive behaviours and more complex learned responses in order to get their message across.

● Like all mammals, a dog can adapt to very different conditions, including new homes and new families, but it is important to remember that the adaptation is limited by the constraints of canine communication and understanding. Whatever the circumstances, your new family member can only react in canine terms.

● The details of that reaction will be unique to your pet. Its behaviour will have been moulded by a combination of factors including genetic influences from the parents, early environmental influences and early social interaction with its own and other species.

This booklet outlines the general principles of dealing with puppies and preparing them for life, but it

is important to remember that every dog is an individual and that the rules may need to be adapted to suit your particular situation. If you have any doubts or concerns you should contact your veterinary practice for advice.

An understanding of the complexity of the dog in terms of its behaviour will enable you to fully appreciate your new companion and to avoid some of the common mistakes, which can get your relationship off on the wrong footing.



Social behaviour

When your puppy arrives in your home it will probably be the first time that it has been separated from its mother and littermates. Until now the bitch will have been the most important figure in your puppy's life and when it enters your family it will need to form new attachments and social bonds.

● Young puppies will transfer the attachment that they had with their mother onto a person who can provide its essential needs of food, warmth and comfort. In many cases the newcomer will appear to form a particularly close relationship with one family member. They value them as a source of comfort, with the security of a reliable relationship as a foundation, the puppy is able to set off on its voyage of discovery in a human orientated world.



● Although a strong bond between puppy and owner is beneficial in the early stages there comes a time when the newcomer needs to learn to stand on his own four paws. In the wild puppies replace their attachment to their mother and littermates with a wider attachment to the pack as a whole and domestic dogs need to do the same.

Loosening the bond may be difficult for both pup and owner at first, but you need to remember that this is a vital part of your puppy's development. Decreasing the level of attachment

does not involve ceasing all affectionate interaction and you can still have a great relationship with your puppy as long as it is on your terms. From now on you need to ensure that the initiative for social interaction comes from you and not from the puppy. If this process is completed successfully your puppy will learn that social

interaction is not always available on demand. This will enable him to cope with the inevitable periods of solitude that are associated with being a domestic pet. Puppies that fail to "grow up" in this way, and remain dependent on their owner for all their social needs, will be prone to behavioural problems when they are left alone and may go on to develop so called "separation anxiety".

Destruction, howling and toileting are common symptoms of this condition and while it is well-recognized and relatively straightforward to treat it is far better to prevent it in the first place!

Lessons to learn

House-training

● Very few puppies are fully house-trained when they enter their new homes and most owners are prepared for a period of extra cleaning when they take on a young pup. However in many cases the process of house training

is unnecessarily long and drawn out and there is considerable tension between pet and owner as a result.

By following some simple rules and avoiding some of the common mistakes you can maximize your chances of success, and make the whole process far less stressful for you and your puppy.

● Spot the right moment:

It is important for your puppy to be in the right location when it feels the need to relieve itself. If you take your puppy outside when it is most likely to want to go to the toilet (after every meal, when it wakes up, after drinking and after play) you maximize the chances of it forming an appropriate association between being outside and relieving itself. Every time your puppy makes a mistake and goes to the toilet in the house it learns an inappropriate association and the process of house training is slowed down. Although it may

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sound drastic, setting an alarm for intervals of two hours during the day and night and taking your puppy outside on a regular basis can be one of the quickest and simplest ways of house training.

● **Reward works better than punishment!**

If you ensure that you are with your young puppy when it is outside, you can give some form of reward to coincide with the process of toileting and thereby encourage him to see toileting in the garden as a good thing to do! Praise or food can be used but it is very important that the reward is given while the puppy is still outside and not once it is safely back in the house.

● **Never punish your puppy if you have not caught it "on the job."**

Going to the toilet is a necessary and natural behaviour and any form of punishment in house training will lead to confusion. Rather than asso-

ciate the punishment with the act of going to the toilet, the puppy will learn that its owner is displeased when it sees urine and faeces and will soon avoid toileting in front of them as a result. This can make the training process far more difficult and many owners will spend hours in the garden waiting for their puppy to relieve itself only to find that it runs back into the house to toilet on the lounge carpet. The puppy has learned that toileting in private is safer! When you return to find the mess and punish the pup it will react by cowering but this does not mean that the punishment is working. Rather than expressing guilt the puppy is showing submission in an attempt to deflect your anger and its behaviour has no association with the act of toileting, which occurred some time before. Rolled up newspapers, pushing puppies' noses in excreta and screaming at them for being naughty are all inappropriate responses and ones that you should avoid at all costs.

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● **Don't clean up it's business in front of it.**

It can help to avoid cleaning up your puppy's mistakes in front of it especially if you are feeling annoyed or frustrated. Your puppy is very aware of your body language and will be sensitive to your displeasure. Better to clean up out of the puppy's sight to avoid any misinterpretation.

Simple commands

Training your dog to obey commands will be fun but complicated training is not for everyone and most owners simply want a basic level of obedience which will make their dog a pleasure to own.

● You should begin training your new friend very early on. Education begins as soon as the puppy arrives in your home.

● Use simple words as commands and make sure that all of the family are consistent. One word can only have one meaning and it is important that you are all working from the same dictionary.



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- For young puppies it is important to ensure that training is fun and keep the sessions short but frequent. For a three month old puppy, training lessons of 5 minutes are long enough.
- Remember that reward is always more effective than punishment and work to teach the puppy what he should be doing rather than what is wrong.
- Disobedience is very often due to misunderstanding. Vocal signals can take a long time to learn and it is helpful to reinforce their meaning by using clear accompanying hand gestures, which the puppy can interpret more easily.
- When teaching a new command do not keep repeating it when the puppy is not listening or reacting – all you are teaching him is that your voice can be ignored.

Teaching a recall

Probably the most important command in terms of control is the recall. It may save your dog from accidents in the future.

Never punish your dog for not coming back when he is called.

Always reward your dog when he comes to you, however long it takes!

Make your recall command friendly, exciting and unpredictable.

Make yourself as welcoming as possible by adopting a crouched body posture.

Do not grab at your dog as he runs past you.

Give yourself the best possible chance of success.

To have a dog with good recall you need to be the most important and wonderful thing in his life. He should come to you because he wants to be with you and because he finds you exciting, rewarding and fun to be with. At the end of the day isn't that what owning a dog is all about!

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Walking on a lead

Puppies do not inherently know how to walk on a lead and it is important to introduce your new arrival to a lead and collar as soon as possible.

● At first, you could put the collar and lead on your puppy and let it get used to this little constraint without you attempting to take it for a walk.

● When you pull on the lead, do so gently and get your dog's attention by clicking your tongue. As soon as it follows the direction of the lead, reward it with a small food reward and

verbal praise. Don't worry if it only takes a few steps on the first occasion.

● Once the puppy is happy to walk alongside you on its lead you should encourage it to make regular eye contact with you by making interesting little noises and grabbing its attention. In this way, the dog is encouraged to be in communication with you during its walks and a vocal tether backs up the physical lead.



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Preventing pulling

● **Keep the lead slack:** as soon as the puppy pulls, you should stand still. As the puppy reaches the extent of

the lead it will look back to see why it cannot proceed. As it does so you should begin to walk backwards putting very slight pressure on the lead. The puppy will begin to move toward you and as it does so you can encourage it with a positive verbal command of 'come'. Once the puppy is back at your side you should give it lots of praise and continue on your walk. In the early stages of training you



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may need to repeat this exercise several times, but before long your puppy will learn that walking by your heel leads to a walk while pulling on the lead causes him to retrace his steps.

The lead is a very important communication channel between dog and owner and tension and frustration are very easily transmitted down it. Many cases of behaviour problems, such as aggression toward other dogs, are made worse by this negative communication. Try to ensure that you are always calm and in a positive frame of mind when communicating with your dog down the lead.

Taking your dog out

● Puppies need to be taken out and about as soon as possible in order to maximize the processes of socialization and habituation and to teach them to accept diversity and challenge in their world. While it is obviously important to take all necessary precautions not to expose your puppy to pointless

risks, it is sensible to take it out on trips away from home as soon as possible. Places that have been soiled by animals should be avoided, as should contact with unvaccinated animals, but the risks of isolating your puppy in the period between four and fourteen weeks of age are just as serious as those posed by taking him on small outings. To keep risks to a minimum you can carry your puppy in your arms and ensure that the dogs it meets are of good health and vaccination status.

● Once the vaccination process is complete there is no limit to the variety of experiences that you can offer your puppy, but remember that young animals have a high requirement for frequent sleep!!!

● Failing to take your puppy out will put it at risk of developing a number of behavioural problems later in life, including fear of places, people and animals. Many of these dogs will go on to develop aggressive behaviour, which is designed to protect them from the threats that they perceive in their environment. Preventing

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these sorts of problems is a real responsibility for new owners.

- It is not uncommon for puppies to show some degree of fear when they encounter people and places for the first time. It is very important that you react in a positive manner and resist the temptation to offer comfort. Petting and reassuring your puppy at this time runs the risk of reinforcing the fear and making the situation far worse, so it is

best to ignore the reaction and use play as a form of distraction.

If the fearful behaviour continues then seek advice from your veterinary practice – the earlier problems of fear are dealt with the better the prognosis.

Do not think that the problem will get better with time – it probably won't.

Hierarchy

- Dogs are pack animals and in order to make them feel secure within your family you need to teach them their position within your pack. Higher ranking pack members have the job of leading the pack and ensuring its survival and most dogs are reluctant to take this position. They take comfort from being a submissive member of their social group and enjoy the lack of responsibility!



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- The most important thing to remember when interacting with your puppy is consistency. Everyone within the family needs to treat the dog in the same way and thereby reinforce its subordinate position.

- If you observe members of a wolf pack you will see that reinforcing the hierarchy does not involve bully boy tactics and there is no need for confrontation to be used in order to teach a pack member that he is of low rank. Instead individuals respond to subtle signals of superiority from their pack mates.

- It is important to remember the significance of activities such as eating and sleeping when determining rank. Feeding your puppy after the family have eaten and ensuring that he is never given human food from the table or from your plate will help to signal your control over food as a resource. Not allowing your puppy to sleep in your bedroom and giving him a low value location for his bed can

also bring the resource of sleeping areas under your control. It may be that such rules can be relaxed in time, but it is sensible to adhere to a strict plan in the early weeks in order to avoid any potential confusion.

- Behavioural problems are a common reason for breakdowns in the pet owner relationship, and you can help to prevent these problems by remembering that your puppy is not a person! You are in the best position to prevent problem behaviours and now is the time to start.

Take the time to learn your puppy's language and you will find that you are able to communicate far more effectively.



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*Bringing up a puppy
can be a challenge
as well as an adventure; but if you respect
your pet's behavioural heritage
as well as its individual personality you can learn
to understand the world from a canine perspective
and enjoy years of rewarding companionship
with your happy and faithful friend.*

*If you experience any problems
with your pet's behaviour
or consider his reactions to be inappropriate,
annoying or even dangerous do not hesitate
to seek advice from your veterinary practice.
They are there to help you.*

●
Sarah Heath
BVSc MRCVS Veterinary Surgeon