

Some Tips from a Trainer for *choosing, preparing* & *guiding* a new puppy into your home

by Steve DiTullio



Welcoming a puppy into your home is a big responsibility, (for me it's almost the same mind-set as having a new baby in the house) but when it is taken seriously, it can be very rewarding for both the dog & the owner.

What type of puppy interests me? Research a variety of breeds and what they were designed for. For example, were they bred for hunting, working, guarding, etc.? What energy level and tendencies does the breed I like possibly have? Do I have the time, energy and the environment to match the dog's needs? Does this breed require special attention to grooming or is it prone to any medical disadvantages? Research thoroughly and carefully. ***Do not get a puppy because it looks cute; this is a mistake so many people make and countless animals end up in shelters once they outgrow their puppy look.** Do it because you want to give this animal a quality life in your home with your family and to fulfill its life to the fullest.

Selecting resources for getting your puppy. Rescue organizations and shelters are great places to search, as there are so many wonderful dogs available and many pure-breeds can be found at minimal fees. These animals *need* quality homes. If a breeder is where you have to go, make sure they have a solid reputation and have been involved with the breed for an extended period of time. Also make sure they stand by any contract that they have. You can even try to get involved in a foster program through a rescue group where you have a dog in your home for a few days or even a few weeks to see if this is something that works for your lifestyle. Some veterinarians can even be used as resources to get suggestions on where to find a pup. Mixed breeds are excellent candidates for adoption and are usually less likely to develop genetic illness, and they make wonderful companions!

Before your pup is brought home, prepare an area where the pup will be. Puppy proof the area and make sure it is safe. Hide all electric

cords, chemicals, hazards or things of value that the pup could get at. Have a crate or an exercise pen (also called an x-pen) set up with bedding for comfort, chew toys and treats to keep him busy and satisfied. Also buy bowls for water and food. Puppy gates might be a good idea depending on your living situation (to block off stairways, for instance). Leashes, a harness and a flat collar are a must. Make sure you've done your research and have chosen a veterinarian that you are going to use. An appointment should be made in a timely fashion with the pups arrival, usually within a day or two of bringing him home.

Bringing the pup home. Know what type of food he was being fed so you can continue feeding the same thing, but also make sure it is a quality food. If it is not, you may want to consider weening him off his old food onto a new, high-quality one. If you are fortunate enough to find a pup that is still with its mother or litter mates, bring a towel or blanket that the mother laid on or was rubbed down with for the pup's crate. Introduce the pup in front of your house and yard for some exploring and activity, maybe even play with the pup to tire him out a little bit before bringing him into your house. Bring the pup to a safe area, his crate or exercise pen, with some very small treats already in it. Allow the pup to explore without too much intervention. Observe his curiosity and interests. The crate introduction must always be positive, fun and comforting. You can also feed in the crate to create a positive association. Despite what some people think, the crate is *not* used for punishment.

Acclimating the pup to your home area and the people who will be guiding him is very important. It is also suggested that you have a foundation and guiding plan with these people. If everyone is on the same page and communicating with the pup in the same manner, the success rate for your pup's learning is going to be multiplied. Do not overwhelm a new pup in a new environment with too many visitors or other animals. Take your time and let him explore while you supervise and guide him.

Your demeanor and voice at this early stage of interaction will be very important. With toys, games and treats, get the pup to follow you. This is where you start to get some connection and focus from the pup. This will help obedience training to move along easier. I like to use a leash and a flat collar to tether the pup to me when I am doing simple tasks around the house; it makes it much easier for me to keep an eye on him and guide him along with me. So if an accident does happen, it is really my fault, not his. We have to pay close attention to our new pups.

Starting Puppy Obedience. Puppies that are with their litter mates and

mother for the first seven to nine weeks have already started to learn through pack structure. I like to start training as soon as the pup will follow and focus on me. I always make training fun and pleasant with soft, easy obedience. I drive them with treats and food. You can never get frustrated or take it personal if your pup does not understand what you are asking of him. Being relaxed, consistent, fun and rewarding will encourage the pup to follow your guidance. Luring with treats is a positive and great way to manipulate a pup into a position like sit, down or stay. I like to do an exercise of patience when the pup is going to exit from the crate. I teach the pup to stay until I can open the crate door without him bolting out. This is a really good exercise to gain control and I always do it with no pressure, it's about patience and all positive motivation.



Steve and Lulu, a 9 week old Golden Doodle, going through some beginner puppy obedience. From left to right: luring, gaining focus, sit, down.



Left to right: setting up for the crate exercise, crate half open, and finally, open.

As your pup moves along, socializing him with other people and animals is very important. You must pay attention while supervising or interacting to avoid any instances that could hurt the pup mentally or physically. **It is said that a pup's most impressionable age is six to sixteen weeks.** There is a debate that pups

cannot be outside or interact with people or dogs due to risk of getting sick because they are not fully vaccinated until approximately sixteen weeks. I feel that with diligent supervision of where and what the pup encounters, he needs to start to have exposure to all types of stimulation to help him be confident, stable and sure in his new world with you as a confident guide.



Steve and Lucky, a 7 month old Pitbull, going through some focus and introduction exercises. From left to right, top to bottom: focus in a sit, teaching the "down," heeling with focus, dog interaction with direction from me (the guide), dog interaction with supervision, and Sato helping the interaction with relaxation.

Exposure to environmental stimulation at early stages is a big factor in the development of a pup. He needs to feel different surfaces on his feet, hear and smell the world around him and see strange or odd objects where you, as the guide, can confidently move him through them. Some pups do this easily while others may need some encouragement.

When your pup is relaxed after play and exercise, this is a good time to gently start touching his feet, ears, mouth and eyes. This will start to desensitize the pup and get him used to being handled. In the long run, your vet and groomer will appreciate it and so will you.

House breaking should start immediately. By using wee-wee pads and newspapers in your home, I feel you are sending a negative message to the dog that it is all right to soil in your house. To get the pup on the right track, pick a safe spot in your yard, driveway or side walk that you have sanitized previously with a safe diluted mixture of bleach and water. Then take him to that spot consistently. When the pup does eliminate there, do not clean the spot right away. When you bring him back to this elimination spot, the smell that was previously there can help trigger the pup's elimination sensory. As the pup gets more comfort-

able eliminating outside, you can start putting a word or command to it like potty, get busy or outside. Praise him when he eliminates by using the command. With consistency, patience and time, you can have a dog that eliminates on command. I have helped veterinarians get some of the easiest urine samples from my dogs using these methods over the years. They were very impressed. This technique is great for poor weather conditions such as rain, sleet, snow and cold days when the dog has to get out to eliminate. It is also handy to use when traveling by car to get the dog out for a potty stop.

Most dogs are calmer and more confident when there is a predictable routine in their life with training and guidance. This all starts in puppyhood and is carried out through the animal's life. Consistency with all aspects of training and guidance while setting up a pup (or a dog) to succeed can give that animal clarity in what we want and what we do not want in his behavior. Mismanagement has the potential to lead to all types of behavioral issues that can make a dog act out unfavorably which leads to frustrated and, many times, angry owners. When people get into these frames of mind, communication to these animals is lost and the animal usually always suffers the consequences in some form or another. These are the dogs that I am sad to say are filling the shelters and rescue organizations to the brim.



Mismanagement is the leading cause of behavioral issues and to my knowledge, behavioral issues are probably the leading cause of euthanasia. I would like everyone to keep that in mind in hopes that we can all become better guides for our beloved followers. ■

Steve DiTullio grew up in a family of animal lovers, especially dogs. He always had 1 to 3 dogs in his family. They were great pets but never trained well. Due to their misunderstanding of what it actually takes to fulfill a dog's needs, he became involved in training around 1992 with a great dog he had. That dog and the first trainer who trained them started his real understanding of what a dog needs (Structure, Guidance and Alliance). As he has been training and observing behaviors over the years, he met many people and their dogs. It motivates him to help both human and animal to understand each other. It is important to understand individual personalities of dogs and to be resourceful in managing unwanted behaviors and rewarding the good behaviors. The guide must always maintain a relaxed but direct demeanor to accomplish communication. Visit him online: www.forpawzdogtraining.com or www.stevedogtraining.com