

Puppy Agility

By Christy Gammage, Practice Makes Pawfect

I see a lot of new puppies out there. People often ask “When can I start agility training with my puppy / young dog?” The general answer can be rather nuanced. My answer is “Right now!” because there is so much a dog must learn that will make them both a good canine citizen and great agility partner. The caveat is that you limit your training to activities that do not stress those growing bones or baby joints. This means No Jumping, no big heights, no twisty weaves and no heavy landings. And you must also fit your training into a puppy’s attention span.

First things first. Getting them potty trained and walking nicely on a leash are obvious priorities, but don’t wait for success with those before starting other training. Once they have settled into your home schedule and gotten their vaccinations, take them out and about to expose them to situations they will see in their life. Their job right now is to understand and comfortably accept how the world works. They won’t learn that by staying at home.

The ideal agility dog is neutral towards people, other dogs, busy environments, and loud noises. When you have your young dog out in the world, be very aware of their emotional state. If they are scared, they are not learning anything that will help them. Allow plenty of space between them and what they are afraid of, whether that is people, dogs, or anything else. Don’t force them to interact with anyone or anything. Let them explore the world on their own terms. Your job is to set up safe situations where they can do this. Then constantly monitor them for when they need a break from the stimulation.

Recalls are probably the most important skill you can teach your dog. Start by making their name important to them by saying their name and giving them a piece of kibble. Do this 5-10 times in multiple sessions for a day or two. Then start adding in mini recalls where you say their name when they are a few feet away doing something else. When they look at you or, better yet, come over to you, they get a treat. Yes, this means you always have kibble in your pocket so you can always reward for them coming to you. (Warn the person who does the laundry.)

Once they seem to know their name, build your recall by calling their name while walking in the other direction. Reward when they come up to the side on which you are looking back at them.

Sit, Down, and Stay are all used in agility, so don’t forget these obedience basics. Having a dog that will automatically sit when they want something (like going out or getting their leash on) is much better than having them jump and paw at you or the door. It is easy to train by just waiting for the sit before continuing the activity that the dog wants. An example would be if your dog wants out of their crate or pen or back door. When you are ready to let them out, just wait until they sit before you move towards them. Stop moving when they jump up. Wait until they sit again before moving towards them. (It’s a lot like the children’s game of Red Light, Green Light.) Once you get to the crate/pen, you still only move to open the door when the dog is sitting. Once the door is unlatched, you may still have to wait for the dog to sit before actually opening the door. A more advanced version has you start to open the



door but gently close it if the dog gets up. Eventually the dog will stay seated as you open the door fully, then you can release them with an “OK” or similar word. When the dog understands that sitting is how I get my human to do what I want, they may start offering a sit for other things.

Learn what your puppy likes in food, toys and play styles. These are the things that you will use as their rewards in various training scenarios. Tugging is a common reward in agility circles. To get a good tugger, you must let them win most of the time. Who doesn’t like a game they usually win? When they start bringing you the toy to play tug, you know you are doing it right. If you need to take something away from the puppy, always have a good or better item (food or another toy) to trade.

Now to the ‘agility’ training. Have them walk over unusual surfaces: paper, cardboard, rubber, yoga mats, plastic, ‘small bubble’ wrap, slightly slick surfaces, tall grass, deep mulch, short sets of stairs, etc. Taking them for walks in ‘wild’ areas with sticks and natural obstacles is great training. Have them walk on things that are squishy or slightly wiggly: cushions, inflatable exercise equipment, a piece of plywood with something like a Lego under it so it rocks slightly, elevators. Getting the dog comfortable with all kinds of things and movement under their feet is great for a brave dog in later teeter training.

Another great puppy exercise is to have them navigate over several poles on the ground. These ‘cavalletti’ help them figure out where all their feet need to be placed. You can start with the poles evenly spaced then move to just random patterns on the ground. When the puppy is comfortable stepping over poles, you can raise them slightly (no higher than the dog’s hocks).

Walking along a board a couple of inches off the ground is another great exercise. They learn to keep their feet on the board w/o any dire consequences if they miss stepping on the board. You can also make the board into a mini teeter by affixing a dowel or small pipe to the center as a pivot point. Whatever pivot item you use, keep it very low and well-connected so the board doesn’t slide/roll out from under the dog. You want the dog happily pouncing on the board to get a treat.

Tricks like take-a-bow, high-5, backing up and left and right spins all have direct correlations to agility as great warm-up activities or directional commands while on an

agility course. Just remember to keep your dog (and yourself) ambidextrous and not just using one hand/paw/direction.

Train your puppy to run ahead of you to a plate with a treat on it. You want them really focused and driving ahead of you to the reward once you release them. Start with a hungry puppy. Physically restrain them slightly before releasing to get to the treat a foot or two away. Gradually add distance until you can send your puppy to the plate/bowl from 15 feet away. Only do a couple of repetitions at a time to keep it fresh. Add in a “Get It” or “Go On” cue.

Before your puppy takes any real jump, you can train them to follow your directions on a jumpers style course. Start with bars on the ground or remove them all together. Teach them that running between the uprights gets a reward and you have built value

for the obstacles before they have to put in any jumping effort. Once they understand going through uprights, string together 3, 5 then 7 obstacles before rewarding. When you start to add height, anything below the hocks should be safe for occasional practice with young dogs. Gradually add height when your puppy’s growth plates have closed, which can vary depending on breed and individual.

Your puppy is a sponge right now, so don’t waste a minute of your puppy’s time. Start training the things they need to succeed in life and in the agility ring. But you’ll be doing this in sessions of only three to five minutes at a time. And in between, there will be lots of time to just enjoy them being a puppy. Happy Practicing.

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Christy Gammage

@agility@gammage.org

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