What to Expect: Introducing a Puppy to Your Adult Dogs

By Laurie Luck on 08/01/2013
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Sibling rivalry

Getting a new puppy is exciting—at least for the humans in the family. Sometimes the dog of the house doesn't think the pup is a welcome addition, however. Many people believe that adding a puppy to the family will be harmonious, and that their current dog will be a good dog "mommy" or "daddy." They are disappointed when that doesn't happen. Often, expectations are unrealistic, but in most cases what the human family members see instead of those expectations is completely normal.



Knowing in advance what to expect can help families, and the existing dogs, make the process of introducing a new puppy to the household as easy as possible.

What to expect

I've had the unique experience of welcoming 15 puppies into our house over the last 12 years. As puppy raisers for a service dog organization, on average my husband and I welcome a new pup each year. The new pup arrives when he is about 8 weeks old. He is away from his littermates, mama, and his familiar surroundings for the very first time.

We have three dogs (permanent family members) and each new puppy addition has taught us more about how adult dogs and puppies integrate. We're working on puppy #15 and here is what I've learned so far:

- None of my dogs has ever welcomed a puppy with open arms (paws)
- All of the dogs growl and snap and move away from the pup
- NONE of the dogs has ever hurt a puppy

These observations are pretty normal. Every new puppy has had the same welcome, year after year, from my dogs. While the occasional dog will delight in welcoming a pup into the house, in my experience most dogs don't open up the "welcome wagon" when a new pup enters the family.

Communication skills

Puppies are just learning how to communicate with one another. Usually, pups have only had experience reading their own littermates and mother. Their communication skills are still developing and they don't know the "rules of the road" when it comes to interacting with new and different dogs.



German shepherd puppies playing.

Puppies even have different play styles than adult dogs. When you compare the way puppies play to the way adult dogs play, the differences are vast. Dogs follow a prescribed set of rules. There is a certain way to greet one another. There is a specific way to invite play. There is a way to stop play. There is an entire manners structure that adult dogs ascribe to, and it makes their social interactions predictable and enjoyable. There is a shared language between dogs, and adult dogs are fluent in that language.

Puppies don't follow the rules that the adult dogs depend on for good, solid doggie communication. Puppies don't even know that rules exist! When littermate puppies play together, the only rule is: *Don't hurt one another*. I've watched a gleeful puppy jump on his sleeping littermate's head with reckless abandon. Upon waking, that littermate joyously engages in play with the head-jumper. With that kind of feedback, it is easy to see why puppies don't understand that the world has rules.

When a pup arrives at a new home without another pup in sight to play with, naturally he picks the next closest thing: the adult dog. The pup does what he has done with his littermates—launches on the head of the sleeping adult dog. "What a rude awakening," says sleeping dog! And the snarl that comes from the adult dog is wholly unexpected and startling to the new puppy. Occasionally, if the snarl isn't enough to deter the puppy from re-launching himself onto the sleepy dog, a full display of teeth along with the most guttural growl you've ever heard will convince the pup to cease and desist.

Hear this

According to our adult dogs, puppies have really poor social skills and have lots to learn. Our adult dogs have been valuable teachers to the puppies we have hosted, and we are grateful to them. The first lesson the puppy learns is where the lines are drawn. There are a lot of DON'Ts that our dogs teach the puppy:



An adult dog communicates to a puppy that he has crossed the line.

- DON'T jump on my head.
- DON'T steal the toy I'm playing with
- DON'T put your face in my bowl when I'm eating.
- DON'T walk on me.
- DON'T bite my ears or my tail.
- DON'T sit on me.
- DON'T bark in my face.
- DON'T come any closer.

As long as the adult dogs' **behavior** is appropriate (they don't connect with the pup, for instance), everything is fine, and the pup begins to learn the new rules of this new house. After about three weeks, some play between the adults and the puppy begins, although with two of our three dogs it takes maybe four or five weeks before they will choose to play with the pup.

Set up for success

For a harmonious household, you want to set up both the puppy and the dog for success.

Supervise!

Supervision is essential. Because the pup doesn't have the same set of social skills as the adult dog, I'm around for all of the interactions between the two. I want to be there to help guide the puppy toward appropriate social efforts and to keep the peace for the adult dogs. I also want my adult dogs to know that I'm there running interference for them; they can count on me to keep the puppy from becoming too much of a nuisance. The more I supervise, the fewer opportunities the dogs have to snap, bark, or growl at the pup.

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Too often, the adult dogs in the house are expected to take whatever the puppy can dish out. That's akin to expecting patrons of a restaurant to accept a stranger's child crawling under and climbing on their tables! Those expectations set up the puppy for trouble. The

puppy won't learn the vital social skills he'll need to navigate the doggy world he lives in. It's also not fair for the dogs that live in your house. The adult dogs may accept it for a short period of time, but then the puppy's behavior reaches a tipping point. In those circumstances, the dog may strike out with more force than he would have if he had been allowed to tell the pup to knock it off much earlier in the process.

Crates, gates, and pens

I like to put either the adult dogs or the puppy in the crate, behind a gate, or in an exercise pen (x-pen) for some quiet time. Imposing periods of predictable, scheduled, and consistent separation between the puppy and the adult dogs goes a long way toward a harmonious life together. Puppies tend to be persistent and energetic. They don't give up quickly and may pester an older dog for much longer than the dog would allow. By setting up scheduled separation opportunities, both the pup and the dog are getting the breaks they need from each another.

Escape route

It's essential for both the dog and the puppy to have an escape route and a "safe house." I taught my dogs how to move away from an annoying puppy very early in our service-dog-raising years. I would call out "kennel" if my dogs were beginning to become annoyed by the puppy. They would run to their crate, I'd put a frozen stuffed Kong inside, and I would close the door. The dogs could enjoy a special treat *and* be rid of the annoyance. Very quickly, they began self-crating when they had enough of the puppy. I reinforce that decision to self-crate almost every time with the delivery of a frozen stuffed Kong.

Avoid punishment

Growls are a form of communication. Because puppies have immature communication skills, they frequently miss the more subtle signals your older dog shows, and the dog may need to resort to growling. Resist the urge to correct your dog for growling. Growling may be what the puppy needs in order to recognize that the dog doesn't want to interact. If you find yourself correcting either the puppy or the dog, supervise more instead and use the crates, gates, and pens as ways to manage the interactions between the two.

Reinforce the behavior you like

You can teach your dog to tolerate the new puppy using the same **clicker training** principles you use to teach your dog to sit and lie down. If your dog ignores the puppy instead of snarling, reinforce that! Ignoring is better than snarling, right? Just like in obedience class, after your dog is reliably ignoring rather than snarling, raise the bar and expect a little bit more from your dog. You might reinforce tolerance next. Say your dog doesn't growl or get up and move if the puppy lies down beside the adult dog. Reinforce that!

Click and treat

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Using the clicker can help an older dog understand what behavior you would like to see from him in relation to the new puppy. A healthy side effect of using the clicker to ease the transition is that that pattern creates for the existing dog a happy association with the new puppy. When the new puppy comes around, the older dog will get the opportunity to earn clicks and treats.

What to click?

Think about what behavior you'd like to see from your dog that isn't too hard to accomplish. Using the example above, doing anything *other than* growling at a puppy might be a good behavior to click and treat.

Remember that it is your responsibility to the existing dog is to keep the puppy far enough away that he can't annoy the existing dog. It's up to *you* to ensure that the existing dog is able to get clicked and treated easily, so be sure to use tethers, crates, and gates to help your dog earn a click. Continue to click and treat appropriate behavior from the existing dog until he's tolerating appropriate puppy antics.

As the older dog gets more comfortable with the puppy and tolerates appropriate puppy interaction, I often change the **criteria**. I click the existing dog for making the decision to excuse himself from the situation voluntarily. I would much rather that my dog simply walks away from an exuberant puppy than escalates his behavior to match the puppy.

I won't put the existing dog in a position where he resists his natural "doggie nature" to endure unpleasant puppy interactions *just* to earn a click and treat. I ensure that the existing dog is enjoying the interaction and is patient and tolerant because he's beginning to enjoy the interaction with the pup, and not just enduring it for the sake of training.

Using the clicker to reinforce appropriate behavior, along with limiting the pup's access to the existing dog, translates into setting up both for success. Manage the situation and provide clicker trained guidance as to what's appropriate—for both the pup and the existing dog.

Warning signs

Not every dog likes puppies. Some dogs don't tolerate puppies at all, and may have over-the-top reactions that could harm the puppy. It's important to keep a watchful eye on the interactions, and intervene when body language and communication escalate to an unsafe level.



Happy together

If during the process of escalation the puppy yips or squeals, and your dog escalates his response even more, definitely intervene. Dogs well versed in dog-dog communication understand that yip or squeal is the equivalent of the pup crying "Uncle!" and should back off from the pup. If you see the opposite—the cries of "Uncle" lead to increased agitation in your dog—separate the two immediately.

One big (happy) family

After what seems like an eternity but is really only about three weeks, you'll begin to notice some signs of harmony between the dog and the puppy. If you have done your part helping the dog and puppy develop their communication skills, this is the beginning of a fabulous friendship—or at least a peaceful co-existence. Not all dogs love each another, so don't be disappointed if your dog doesn't fall head over heels in love with the new dog in the house. There is enough love for both, and comfortable cohabitation is a fine accomplishment.

About the author



Laurie Luck, KPA CTP, and a Karen Pryor Academy faculty member, is the founder of **Smart Dog University**. She has been involved with many pet dog trainer certification initiatives, all based on humane training practices and the latest scientific knowledge. Laurie also participates in service dog training, and she and her Tango are a pet-therapy team. Through her work with dogs and owners, Laurie has developed many happy canine and human friendships.