

Belgian Malinois

By Kerry Gardner

How to socialize without losing protective traits

The Belgian Malinois dog is often trained for protection and scent work in the military and police fields. An excellent fighter and fierce hunter, you may wonder how this dog can be so calm and affable in a non-threatening situation. A lot of training goes into building the dog's confidence and teaching it how to react appropriately in a variety of situations.

Proper socialization of any dog must start at a very young age. Puppies learn to accept new environments and people quite readily until about four months of age. During these early months, a trainer or handler can begin to develop a strong bond with the puppy, which is key to teaching manners. You will notice that a police officer working with a Malinois partner is able to maneuver through crowds and noisy situations without losing the dog's attention to the job at hand.

Nothing in life is free

Police puppy trainers say the ability to do this is partly natural for the dog but must be refined in early training. "It starts with only rewarding the behavior you want to see," said Kathryn Smith, who is a police puppy trainer in Minnesota. You teach them respect by always maintaining control. Smith doesn't teach her puppies to sit, stay and rollover, but rather, she teaches the puppies how to earn what they need. In other words, she structures their environment and makes sure they stick to the program by making them ask for things. If the puppy wants to cuddle, it cannot just come over and nudge her hand with its nose. It must wait quietly until Smith gives the puppy permission to receive its pats. Then, when she is done petting the puppy, she tells the puppy that she is done and sends it away. When the puppy turns its attention to something else, it is rewarded with a bit of kibble.

Feeding time is all the time

Smith doesn't feed her puppies at specified times of day, but instead, feeds them little bits of kibble throughout the day. She measures the daily allowance of kibble in the morning and rations it out to reward appropriate behavior throughout the day. It's interesting to note that Smith isn't teaching basic obedience. In fact, she says it's imperative for the dogs to remain "green" until they are paired with their police partners. She only works with them on honing their prey skills and bite work, leaving the obedience up to the K-9 team to learn together.

Dogs are smart enough to make decisions

Malinois puppies learn how to control their emotions and how to have an “on/off switch” through this style of training. Smith says teaching working skills and basic obedience are two different things. She develops “full metal dogs” by working their bite skills with different objects. She starts with very soft things like leather puppy rags and rubber balls and works up to harder surfaces until a puppy will fully bite into metal without hesitation. She also works the puppies in different environments, to manage unusual surface textures and strange or loud noises.

A busy dog is a good dog

The Belgian Malinois is a working dog, and to that end, it must be able to deal with every situation without becoming fearful or distracted. The breed’s natural high energy level lends itself well to having a full-time job. When the dog is busy protecting something or someone, it doesn’t have time to be destructive. Unfortunately, Smith says, a high percentage of Mals end up in rescue because owners are ill-prepared to keep the dog busy in its day-to-day life.