

Selecting a Great Puppy Class

By Nancy Weller, CPDT, CTC

You've got a new puppy. You want to do everything right so that you have a well-adjusted and well-behaved adult dog. Your puppy is extremely impressionable. In fact, your puppy is in that critical "socialization" period that will close by approximately 18 weeks of age, the maximum age for puppy classes. That's only 4.5 months! And for some pups it is even sooner. The learning environment you provide for your pup during this short period will set the foundation for the rest of your dog's life. That is why it is critically important to give your pup ample opportunity to learn bite inhibition and to relentlessly socialize your pup. This is the time to instill good habits and prevent bad habits from taking hold. It is the time to set expectations, teach your pup the rules and practice them consistently. Puppy classes are ideal for setting that foundation, provided that you find one that meets the following recommendations:

1) Select a positive, rewards-based class with a qualified trainer. Before signing up, research the trainer to be sure that the trainer is both dog *and* people friendly. If an organization claims that the trainers are "certified," be sure that they actually *are* certified by a credible organization. Equipment requirements should include a regular flat collar and leash, food rewards and a fanny pack or "bait bag" to hold the food rewards. There should be no mention of "training collars." Choke chains and pinch collars should be prohibited. Classes should be indoors in a freshly cleaned room. Recommended trainer-to-dog ratio is 1:8. Having additional trainers or assistants is even better. Puppy age and vaccination requirements may vary slightly, but pup should be about two weeks past the first set of shots and under 18 weeks of age on the first day of class.

2) Puppy classes should provide ample off-leash play time. Off-leash play provides your puppy the opportunity to develop good bite inhibition and good doggy social skills (both are best learned before 18 weeks). A puppy class *must* include off-leash play opportunities. To prevent the play sessions from getting out of control, your trainer should periodically instruct owners to interrupt off-leash play sessions to settle pups and get their attention briefly. Your trainer should be able to read puppy body language and explain to you what you are observing as the pups play. As the pups learn their lessons (sit, down, etc.), these should be incorporated into the off-leash play interruptions to build off-leash reliability.

3) Puppy classes should provide on-leash training. It teaches owners how to manage a pup on a leash. It teaches the pups how to behave on a leash which, when out in public, is pretty much where the pup is going to be, unless you are at a dog park. Puppy classes that are totally off leash do little more than create dogs who don't have a clue as to how to behave when they are on a leash. Classes where the pups are all off leash, all the time, can be chaotic. It is difficult for even experienced owners to hear and concentrate on what the trainer is saying while also trying to keep their pup's attention, other pups are running amok, and other participants are talking to their pups. The frustrated owner then resorts to holding the puppy by the collar while trying to train. Both pup and owner end up stressed and overwhelmed which is not a good environment for learning. Once the puppies learn their lessons on leash, without the temptation of running off to play, those lessons can be incorporated into the off-leash play time with much better success.

4) Puppy classes get you started with basic lessons such as sit, down, come, walking on leash, etc. Your trainer should explain clearly how to teach an exercise, demonstrate it for you and then coach you through practicing it. Your trainer should teach you how to train without using the leash as a training tool or crutch, perhaps by stepping on your leash. This will leave your hands free for training, but still prevent your impulsive pup from running off. Your trainer should take the time to answer common questions. You should also hear about things such as how to prevent resource guarding, how to tolerate being handled, how to settle and how to house train your puppy. Things covered in class should also be given to you in written form.

5) A well-run puppy class will take into account fearful, shy or over-exuberant puppies. Overcoming fear cannot be rushed, nor can it be resolved by allowing the more exuberant pups to pounce on the shyer ones. The fearful pup must be protected from having a bad experience, while being provided opportunities to gain confidence. This might be accomplished by pairing lower-key pups with ones of a similar nature in a cordoned-off area until they exhibit more confidence. Your trainer should be able to decide the best course of action. It could take several weeks, so do not give up if your pup is fearful. Likewise, over-the-top pups must learn that bullying other puppies will earn them a time-out from play. No puppy should have to tolerate being bullied by another pup. A few well-timed time-outs have proven to decrease bullying.

A special note about puppy socials: Well-run puppy socials will help your pup to further develop bite inhibition and social skills. They should be controlled and include interruptions and brief settle times. Pups should not run wild the entire time. A good puppy social has separate groups of pups with similar play skills. This will ensure that pups who are shy are not overwhelmed, and “bullies” can be put into groups that will teach them to be more respectful. If you are lucky, your class trainer will also provide socials separate from the classes.

In summary, every puppy is unique. The relationship between each puppy and owner is unique. A truly great puppy trainer will understand this and will make adjustments to the above class recommendations as necessary to ensure all puppies and owners experience success!

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