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**What to look for in a Puppy Class (and more!)**

**Puppy class is the most important class you will ever take your dog to.** Let me repeat this – Puppy Class is THE most important class you will ever take your dog to! Here’s what I want you to think about when you take a puppy class. Don’t worry about learning commands like sit and down. Yes, those are all great, but you have your dog’s entire life to work on commands and fun tricks. What I want you to think about is socialization, proper socialization. Being around other puppies, other people and different environments in a positive and structured manner. Let me explain…

**How to pick a puppy class**

There are many different dog training schools out there, and sometimes it’s difficult to choose just by looking at a web site. Here are some tips to help with your decision:

* Make sure it’s a positive reinforcement school. Puppies do not understand punishment – If you punish them (yell, spank, give an overly-long time out), the only thing they understand is that their owner is unpredictable and sometimes hurts them. Really. Choke collars, prong collars and shock collars on a puppy are a huge no-no! If you see a school that puts this on a puppy, steer clear.
* Most chain pet stores (Petco, PetSmart) have instructors with limited knowledge of puppy and dog behavior. Part of your goal is to become educated on your dogs behavior, and if you are learning from someone that is still learning themselves you’re probably not getting what you need.
* Ask to go and observe a class. Any training school that is proud of what they do will let you sit in on a class to observe or “audit”. Watch how the instructor interacts with the owners. Watch how the owners are learning to work with their puppies. Going with your “gut” is always helpful!

**What to look for in an instructor**

Your instructor should be knowledgeable on dog behavior and pack mentality. He/she should be aware of puppies that are overly confident (they can easily turn into bullies) and puppies that are overly shy (they can easily develop fear aggression). Having certifications after their name is always nice, but not always needed. Like other professions, there are many different companies that will take your hundreds of dollars to give you initials after your name. You can have a really great instructor that does not have certifications, but can still be savvy with dog language and has the proper experience.



**What the curriculum should include**

If your puppy is under (around) four months old, don’t be worried if your class does not include too many commands. It should have a few basic tricks, like sit, down, pay attention. But it should mostly include socialization time. Structured interaction with the other puppies. Structured interaction with the people. Safe introductions to scary objects (like vacuum cleaners and big brooms) is always great, because your puppy will go through a few different fear stages. Your instructor should be coaching you on how to work with your puppy so he/she can learn that none of these are worrisome. This is also a great class to teach you more about crate training, housetraining and other “age appropriate” experiences.

**Be your puppy’s advocate**

When you finally pick a training school that meets your requirements, don’t forget that you are your puppy’s advocate! If your puppy is in a situation that makes you feel uncomfortable, don’t be afraid to put a halt to it! This is a very fragile age, and one bad experience can alter the way your dog feels about things for the rest of their life! Some puppies will be afraid the first couple times they go to puppy class, that is very normal. But, if your puppy is put in a situation that makes you feel worried – Speak out! Let the instructor know that you are going to pick up your puppy, or take your puppy out of that situation. Yes, it’s okay to do this! It’s also okay to remove your puppy from a situation in that moment, and then talk to your instructor about it later. Any instructor that is confident with what they are doing will not put blame on you, or tell you that your puppy is bad, or talk bad about others. They will (or, they \*should\*) encourage conversation and use this as an education time to share knowledge about how to prevent the situation from happening in the first place, or how to correctly work through it if it happens again.

**Puppy playgroups**

If you can find a good Puppy Playgroup near you, consider yourself very lucky! Take advantage of it as often as you can during these first few months after you bring your puppy home. The more supervised socialization you can give your puppy during this time, the better! Playgroups will often offer a larger group of puppies, so the chances of your puppy finding a fun playmate are even greater.

The two biggest things we see in puppies at this age, and to look out for, are the puppies that want to jump on everyone (overly bold), or the puppies that want to hide and become invisible.

If your puppy is overly confident, you may want to become a “hovering” owner for a while. This means always being within arms-reach of your puppy, so you can quickly and gently redirect him if he gets too rowdy with his playmate. Your class instructor should be able to coach you on good timing with this. I am of the opinion that continually diffusing play will help to elevate it from escalating in the first place. Simply showing your puppy a treat and having him turn his head towards you while he’s playing is great. Do this every 30-60 seconds while he’s playing. This also teaches him that when he’s playing and you approach, it’s a good thing!



Tallulah meeting a new Labrador friend for the first time. They were quick BFF’s – Two seconds after this picture was taken they were playing in the snow together!

The other behavior we see most during puppy class or playgroups are puppies that have not yet come out of their shells, they want to be invisible during playtime. These are the puppies that are hiding under chairs, not interacting with the other puppies. Sometimes they may walk around and sniff the perimeter of the room, trying to be invisible. These are all totally okay. This is a puppy’s way of trying to advert the attention from them. It may take them a session or two to blossom and start to venture to the center of the room to play (or sometimes even just be near two puppies that are playing). With little kids you’ll often see “parallel play”. They will both be playing, but not with each other. As long as your puppy is safe, doesn’t feel threatened, it’s okay. Give them a safe chair to go under if they need to. Let them stand between your legs if they feel more comfortable there. But, don’t coddle them (continuing to say “it’s okay” and petting them). You don’t want to reinforce the feeling of shyness. But again, if you feel as though your puppy is not in a safe situation, pick him up and don’t be afraid to leave or take him out of the room for a bit! Here is an example of the difference, because sometimes it can be a fine line:

Say your puppy is shy. It’s his first time at puppy class. All he wants to do his hide under the chair. That’s okay! Let him! Don’t try to slide him out to say hi to the other puppies. Let him do it on his own time.

If he’s cool with observing playtime under the chair, that’s a-okay. Some puppies may come over to him to sniff him. That’s okay too, to a point. If you see that a puppy is not just sniffing him, but maybe trying to paw at him, or starts to bark at him, the instructor or owner of that puppy should immediately redirect that puppy away. If they don’t, this is when you need to intervene and remove your puppy from that situation. Don’t forget to be your puppy’s advocate!

**Playing with older dogs**

If you have older dogs that are appropriate, by all means let your puppy play with them. Often older dogs don’t really want to have anything to do with young puppies, and that’s okay too. If you find this is the case, be respectful of the adult dog and remove the puppy (this way you eliminate putting the adult dog in a situation where they feel as though they need to correct the puppy). This still holds true with two of my dogs, Axl (almost two years) and Tallulah (almost 6 months). Tallulah is an energizer bunny and Axl is my strong and steady guy. Okay, I say strong and steady, but keep in mind, we play in our 3.5 acre fenced in back yard for hours a day. Hours! So, when Axl is ready for a break, he puts himself in a “safe” spot. He will either hop on the couch, my bed, or go in his crate. This takes him away from his little sister who will constantly be chewing on his leg or tail to get him to keep playing. When he’s done he doesn’t have to correct her, but can calmly get away from her.

It’s not bad for a puppy to play with adult dogs that are appropriate, but right now your young puppy really needs the interaction of other puppies. Portuguese Water Dogs grow up in the litter learning how to play with other PWDs. Boxer puppies learn how to play like Boxers. Introducing them to different breeds and play styles at this age is ultra-important. Another reason why playing with other puppies is important is they learn better *bite inhibition*. This is where they learn how hard they can bite down whilst playing. If a puppy is playing and bites down too hard, the other puppy will say “no way”! They’ll stop playing with that puppy. If your puppy regularly plays with an adult dog, they will probably learn that they can bite down harder. Nope, this is not a good thing! Because when they go to play with another puppy, they will be perceived as a bully for biting too hard (and then no one will want to play with them!)… Remember to get them around other appropriate puppies as often as you can.

**Dog Parks**

Here is my answer when someone asks if they should take their puppy to a dog park, NO. Absolutely not. There is not even a question in my mind or a situation where it might be okay. But, I have plenty of reasons why it’s not okay!

1. There are tons of adult dogs that simply don’t like puppies. I saw a 4-month old Akita get it’s eyeball bit out by an adult Labrador. Yes, it’s eyeball. And, the Lab’s owners were nowhere to be seen. Nice.
2. Dog parks are often full of adolescent dogs with zero manners. They will bum-rush a puppy and start jumping on it and acting like a total bully. Think this could create your puppy to grow up to be a reactive dog? One that barks at other dogs when they run up to it? Yep.
3. I work with families that have highly aggressive dogs almost every day. I can’t tell you how many of them have gone to dog parks, to “see how he does”.
4. If your puppy doesn’t have a reliable recall (and, he’s a puppy, so chances are he does not), and you take him to an off-leash dog park…. He’s smart - He’ll start to understand that when he goes to the dog park and he’s 50’ away from you, he doesn’t’ have to listen.
5. Believe me, I could go on and on about the reasons why puppies shouldn’t go to dog parks!

**Dog Daycare**

Dog Daycares are not for all breeds, and if you choose to take your puppy to one I would be extremely careful. There are many different things to look for in a dog daycare (this is a whole article by itself!), but if you’re thinking of taking your puppy, just make sure they have a “puppy area” and it is really just for puppies….

**Further learning**

I always say that if you’re only going to take your dog to one class during its lifetime, then take it to a puppy class. But, in reality, PWDs are a breed that are so highly intelligent, it would almost be a disservice to attend one class and then stop. Their minds keep going through adulthood and even into their senior years! Keep going to classes with them! Find your “nitch” and do what you enjoy! There are many things you can do with your pup! Water work, confirmation, rally, agility, nosework, tracking, search and rescue, therapy work, etc. Did you know that you can teach your dog to read? Yes! It’s crazy how many fun and cool things you can do with your dog. And, your dog will LOVE it!

**Treats**

Okay, let me just end this article with talking about treats. Please-Please-Please use high-value treats when you’re training with your puppy. Training is all about motivating your dog to do something, and creating a positive association with what they are doing. Take “coming when called” for example. If you called your dog and then clipped its toenails, do you think your dog would want to come to you the next time you called it? Probably not. But, if you called your dog, and for 10 times in a row it got high value treats (like cut-up chicken, cheese, liver, steak, etc.). Do you think that eleventh time you called it, it would come-a-runnin’? You betcha! Use super-awesome treats when you’re training your dog. Your dog will learn to love training time and always be up for more!

--Giene    
  
***Giene Keyes, Owner and Founder***  
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