
The Fundamentals of Early Puppy Training

Attention and Impulse Control

By Anne Tyson

How would you like your next 12-week-old puppy to come when called and stay where you put it?

Puppies are capable of an incredible amount of learning. Take a look at the videos here of an 11-week old puppy

<http://pets.webshots.com/album/561702198BeMfVc>

and of a nine-week old puppy

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e_cBKKhhgd4

performing fundamental aspects of high-level competition obedience.

This type of training begins at five or six weeks of age and takes just 15 minutes twice a day. While it is beyond the scope of this article to explain how to teach everything these puppies do, the training for complex behaviors always starts with two key elements: attention & impulse control.

Attention and impulse control give the puppy the tools it needs to perform recall, stay and many other more complicated exercises. Without attention and impulse control, puppy training can be an exercise in frustration. This article will explain how to get started and how to progress from attention and impulse control to stay and recall.

Attention

Mold the Behavior

Start the attention games with the puppy as soon as it comes home (hopefully at eight weeks). Breeders can start these exercises at five or six weeks of age.

In the beginning, breeders can do this with multiple puppies at the same time. Simply let a few puppies run loose together and sit on the floor or a chair to observe them. Have available a film canister filled with cream cheese or any other 'lickable' food. Keep the canister hidden.

As the pup approaches you and looks in your direction offer a lick from the canister. Do this every day. As the pup learns how to get food from you by looking your direction, gradually expect them to look more directly at your face and then directly in your eyes. Once they gaze directly in your eyes require that they look for longer and longer periods of time.



Note to breeders: At some point it will be impossible to work more than one puppy at a time because so many of them will be doing the correct

behavior at once that you cannot reward them all in a timely manner. Once that happens, then work with each puppy individually.

When the pup is giving great eye contact with you sitting then gradually start to stand up. At this point you can change to individual soft treats rather than the 'lickable' canister.



Keep the treats in your hand behind your back or at your sides. Don't lure them to look at the treat, keep rewarding for direct eye contact. You will find that in order to give direct eye contact with

you standing the puppy will need to be centered in front of you.

If you look where you want the puppy to sit they will learn to move in order to find eye contact and get their reward.

Using Attention to Instill a Reliable Recall

Once the pup has learned to center itself in front of you, start adding a word to the exercise. Say 'come' or 'here' or 'Rover' or whatever word you want to use for recall and then immediately give the reward. If you wish, you can also start to require that they sit before getting their reward. It is not necessary, however, to require them to sit.

When they have learned the word associated with the eye contact you can start taking a step backwards. They may need a little bit of assistance or luring from you the first couple of times. Just take a

step back, say the recall word, help them if needed and reward for position and eye contact. As they begin to understand that game then you can take multiple steps backward.

To assure a fast recall you'll want to get them running in. Start this by holding their collar, throwing a cookie and letting them chase and eat it. As they reach for the cookie, say their recall word and, if needed, run away from them with enthusiasm. When they get to you give them a reward. As they get patterned to run out and run back, eventually you won't have to run away to keep their speed up. Repeat this game often.

Another game to pattern a running recall is to place a treat on the ground and let them eat it. As they are busy eating it you run away as fast as you can and say their recall word. They will come running. When they reach you give them a treat and then repeat. This is a fun game for the puppy so you cannot over do it.

Reliable Recalls with Distractions

When they perk their ears and come running for their treat at the first utterance of their recall word then start adding distractions.

► Restraint

The first distraction is someone restraining them. Have a helper hold their collar. Show them a treat and then run away a short distance. Stop and turn to face them then say their recall word. The holder should allow the puppy to fight the restraint slightly and then let go of the puppy. This will also increase speed. The more you do this game the better. And as they gain confidence you can increase the distance. Even hide out of sight and call the puppy.

▶ Food

The next distraction is food. Have your helper hold food to your puppy's nose and then walk a short distance and call them.

If they don't come your helper should gently guide them by the collar in a quick full circle that ends facing you. When they are facing you again, call them again. As they move toward you celebrate and then as they get to you reward. Repeat until the puppy will leave the helper's food on the first recall. When they are very good at that, the helper can actually be feeding the puppy. Go through the same pattern of calling and having the helper guide the puppy in a circle if they don't respond. Never repeat the command unless the helper has done circle with the puppy.

▶ Other Dogs

When they are good with food distractions you can add puppy or other dog distractions. Wait until they are playing or otherwise engaged with another dog. Have your helper stationed near the puppy. Go a short distance and call them with your recall word. If they don't come, your helper steps in calmly and guides them in a quick full circle with their collar ending with the puppy facing you. Call them again. Repeat this until the pup will immediately leave another dog to come to their recall word.

At this point you can add multiple and increasing distractions. Have your helper stationed to guide the pup in circle if needed.

The key to fast and reliable recall is repetition. So do these games every day and as often as possible.

Keep it fun!

Impulse Control

Mold the Behavior

Puppies are not known for thinking before they act, while that can be cute and endearing in a youngster, as they grow bigger, cute and endearing become out of control and obnoxious. So how do we get started with young pups on impulse control without affecting their drive to work?

Start these impulse control games as soon as you get your pup home (hopefully at eight weeks of age). Breeders can start this at five or six weeks of age.

Place a small towel on the floor; a kitchen dish towel works perfectly. Pick up the puppy and place them on the towel. At first, stand over them and as they leave the towel just pick them up and place them back on the towel. Don't say anything. It might take quite a few repetitions the first time before they decide to stay on the towel. As soon as they stay for any length of time, praise them, pet them and lift them off the towel. Repeat this exercise every day.



As they learn to stay on the towel you can start getting further away from them. Start by standing up fully. Then take steps sideways. Then steps backwards. Then eventually walk around the puppy. Be sure to praise often and give them breaks for being good. Never call them off the towel or let them leave the towel without you lifting them.

When they have a good understanding of the game you can start adding food rewards. At first, food rewards just tempt them to leave the towel so **don't use food until this step**. But once they know the game you can move in and give them food rewards instead of just praise.

Impulse Control and “Stay”

At this time you can also add a word. So place them on the towel, say 'stay', and walk away. If they stay then walk in and reward at the same time saying 'good stay'. If they don't stay then pick them up and place them back on the towel and say 'stay' then walk away again. Don't hover or help them with your body language, let them figure it out for themselves.



Gradually increase the distance, duration and distraction being careful that they are successful more often than not. You don't want them to be discouraged or to learn to resent the game so take it slow and reward often. As they gain confidence step out of sight briefly and then back in sight and then reward with a 'good stay'. Gradually increase the time out of sight.

The distractions can escalate to food dropped on the floor, ringing the door bell, other dogs playing near them, toys squeaking, you running past them, just about anything you can think of. But, again, be sure to make each session fun and successful.

As they gain confidence gradually reduce the size of the towel. This should happen over time; not all at once and at a rate that the puppy will hardly notice. You can start by folding the kitchen dish towel slightly and then fold again and again. Then move to a wash cloth size then fold the wash cloth. Then take away the towel all together.

As you take away the towel, reduce the duration, distance and distraction to help them succeed. If the pup seems to not understand then go back to the smallest size towel where they can be successful and then slowly fade it away again. In a short time they will be performing stay without the towel and then you can begin to add back in the duration, distance and distraction that the pup was already doing with the aid of the towel. It is amazing how quickly they learn.

So, with just a few minutes a day and some very simple exercises your new puppy can be taught wonderful skills that will be instrumental in all aspects of their adult life. It is important for all young pups to learn these skills – from devoted companion, to field trial star to obedience trial champion to agility phenom – all puppies can use the basic skills of attention and impulse control. Give it a try with your next pup. They'll love the interaction and you'll love the results.