

The Obedience Corner

By Jane L. Coen

“Earning a Dog’s Attention and Respect”

To be successful at American Kennel Club (AKC) Obedience Trials, a trainer must have earned a dog’s undivided attention and respect. Dogs that consistently score well and win their classes are dogs that fully respect their trainers, and are riveted on their trainers when competing in the ring.

When should you begin working on earning your dog’s attention and respect? My answer is simple: the very first time you begin interacting with the dog. As far as I am concerned, that answer applies to very young puppies, as well as to older dogs.

Let’s take puppies, for example. One of the first things my puppies learn is to not exit a crate until given permission. If my puppy attempts to charge out of the crate when I begin to open the crate door, I quickly slam the door shut with the warning, “No, Wait!” I may have to repeat that correction a second time, but by the third time I open the crate door, the puppy steps back and looks at me, seeking my permission to come out of the crate, which I provide with the release command, “Free!” Voila!—my puppy has just had its first lesson in attention and respect.

Another thing my puppies learn right away is not to approach their food bowl without my permission. With my little seven or eight week old puppy on a buckle collar and leash, I place my puppy in a Sit position, and then set the food bowl on the floor a foot in front of the puppy. The puppy will, of course, break the Sit position and attempt to get to its food bowl. As the puppy begins to move, I simply give the leash a quick snap back with “No, Wait!” and reposition the puppy into a Sit position. After a moment or two, I say “Free!” and let the puppy go to its bowl. It typically takes a couple of days before the puppy clearly understands that it cannot break its Sit position and approach the bowl without my permission. By then, when I place the bowl on the floor with the puppy in the Sit position, the puppy immediately looks at my face and retains eye contact until I give the “Free!” release command.

I also begin working on the “Stay” command right away, regardless of the age of the dog. I introduce the “Stay” command during the puppy or dog’s first training session. If I am working with a very young puppy (as young as seven or eight weeks of age), I begin by placing the puppy in a Sit position in front of me, with the puppy wearing its buckle collar and leash, and me kneeling on the floor facing the puppy. I tell the puppy “Stay!” and place the index finger of my right hand within a few inches of the puppy’s nose. If the puppy begins to move, I snap back on the leash held in my left hand behind the puppy’s head, as I say, “Ah, Ah!” After a few moments, I lean into the puppy to pet and praise the puppy before releasing the puppy with a happy sounding “Free!” release command. I am careful to make sure that the puppy does not break the Sit position before I give the “Free!” release command.

Within a couple of weeks, I have the puppy or dog staying 30 seconds to three minutes, depending on the age of the dog. A six month old puppy would be up to three minutes, whereas a nine week old puppy would be up to half a minute. I then begin adding distractions—side steps left and right, leash jiggles, forward pressure on the leash, etc. I then introduce noise distractions that include hand-clapping, squeaky toys and other types of noise makers. My final distraction is a tennis ball—first bouncing the ball in front of the dog, then rolling the ball in front of the dog and, ultimately, throwing the ball against a wall in front of the dog so the ball then bounces back to me.

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Within a couple of days of beginning the “Stay” training, the puppy or dog has learned to respect the “Stay” command and keep its undivided attention on me during the Stay exercise. The key to success is to set a standard of perfection in terms of the dog’s performance of the Stay command, and not to allow the puppy or dog to shift position or move its body in any way during the Stay exercise.

Another thing I do with my dogs—right from puppyhood—is to teach them not to pull on the leash. If a dog is pulling a leash tight, it can feel where you are and has no motivation to keep its attention on you. Even with a very young puppy, if it starts to pull the leash tight, I give a little snap on the leash, while moving quickly in the opposite direction with lots of praise. I often will reward the puppy with a little treat when it catches up to me. Before long, I have a puppy or dog that takes the initiative to keep the leash loose by following me on its own accord, while keeping its attention on me.

As part of teaching a puppy or dog not to pull on the leash, I teach the dog to go up and down stairs on leash without pulling. The dog must remain at my left side, without pulling ahead of me. My dogs know they cannot step off of the last step until I step off first. Any attempt to pull on the leash as we are ascending or descending a set of stairs is met with a sharp snap on the leash to check the dog’s forward motion. Dogs learn this lesson very quickly—within one or two sessions—if the trainer is consistent and firm enough in reinforcing expectations. Besides, it is a question of safety. Who wants to chance breaking their neck—or anything else—by having a dog pull them up or down a set of stairs?

These simple interactions teach a puppy or dog a great deal about respecting its trainer and giving its trainer riveted attention. The good news is that this attention and respect easily carries over to new situations and locations.

Over the last four months, I have been enjoying training my new Golden puppy, “Stella,” who is now six and a half months old. I began Stella’s training when she joined my household at seven weeks of age. I have Stella in my basement when I am conducting training classes. When I work her during those classes, she is totally focused on me—completely ignoring the other dogs and handlers in the class. Stella participates in three- and five-minute Sit and Down Stay exercises with the class dogs, ignoring all kinds of distractions introduced to proof train the dogs. Two weeks ago, Stella passed the AKC Canine Good Citizenship (CGC) Test, the AKC Canine Community Test (advanced CGC) and the screening to become a therapy dog in the pet visitors group to which I belong.

With the proper attention and respect foundation training, any puppy can attain these same accomplishments at a young age, and go on to become a competitive obedience dog. I would be remiss; however, if I did not emphasize that a key ingredient involved in earning a dog’s attention and respect is to provide the dog with meaningful rewards, while making the training FUN! As a trainer, it is our responsibility to make the puppy or dog understand there are significant benefits associated with demonstrating attention and respect-related behaviors. When exhibiting the desired behavior, the puppy or dog should always be rewarded with ample petting, praise and other high value rewards. For instance, I end my dogs’ training sessions with fun retrieving, using a favorite toy, usually a plush toy that I give a name, e.g., “Duckie.”

When the training session is over, I say to the puppy or dog in an excited tone of voice, “Where’s Duckie?” I then snatch the toy off of the shelf, and wiggle the toy in front of the dog’s face before tossing it to the end of the training room. I let the puppy (or dog) retrieve the toy three or four times, ending the game when the dog is still eager to continue to retrieve. During the game, the puppy or dog is completely focused on me and the toy—reinforcing the fact that attention results in reward, and establishing me as a great source of fun.

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Although all of these exercises work very effectively with young puppies, they can also be very effective with older puppies or grown dogs. The keys are to set and reinforce high standards, be consistent, and make it worth your dog’s while to give you the behaviors you are seeking. And...don’t forget to have fun!

Until next time, Happy Heeling!