

Puppy Leadership

Becoming Your Puppy’s Leader and Friend

Dogs are pack animals and from a very early age will seek to establish social relationships with the other animals and/or humans with whom they live and interact. Within a pack, there will be a dominant (alpha) dog who is the leader of the pack and the other dogs will be subordinate to that dog.

Puppies look at members of their human family like “pack” members and will try to communicate with them in the manner they would with other dogs. A problem can arise if the puppy is allowed to become “dominant” in relation to any human family members. Dog’s that are dominant may growl, nip, or seriously bite if they feel that they are the “boss”. They are especially likely to become aggressive if they are asked to do something they don’t want to or if they are disturbed while sleeping or eating. They will often challenge you if you attempt to handle them, for example to groom them, trim their nails, bathe them, put on their collar, etc. They can become very difficult to live with if these behaviors are not prevented.

The key to developing a friendship with your puppy is for each family member to gain his respect as the puppy’s leader.

➤ **Obedience training the puppy is very important.**

Obedience training should start at an early age (8-12 weeks is ideal) and be practiced consistently till the puppy is a year old. Incorporate obedience exercises into every day life by frequently asking the puppy to complete obedience tasks.

➤ **Only give the puppy food, treats, play toys, or anything else it wants after the puppy has “earned” it by completing an obedience task.**

This teaches the puppy to say “please” for anything he wants and that you control the good things in life that he enjoys. This does not have to be complicated or take a lot of time. You can simply ask the puppy to sit before setting down his food bowl, or to lay down before you open the door to let him outside. You can also reward the puppy for any behavior which you want to encourage; for example, give the puppy a reward as soon as he goes potty outside or when he is laying quietly and chewing on a chew toy. Be creative and practice rewarding good behaviors and asking the puppy to do something before you give him anything he wants.

➤ **Only give the puppy physical affection on your terms.**

It is tempting to try to befriend the puppy by showering love and affection on him and letting him have his own way. While affection and love are important, they must be given on your terms and not on demand by the puppy. If the puppy “tells” you to pet him, for example by nudging your hand, jumping on you, or barking at you, and you comply by petting him, he has learned he can boss you into giving him attention. When the puppy is demanding attention, you should ignore the puppy or better yet give him a job to do, such as completing an obedience task. Then call the puppy to you and give him affection at YOUR initiation. Attention and affection should always be given only when you initiate it, never when the puppy has demanded it. You can still love your puppy just as much and give him just as much affection, it just needs to be on your terms.

➤ **Don’t play tug-of-war, wrestling games, or teasing games with your puppy as they encourage rowdy, aggressive behavior.**