

IT TAKES A PACK TO RAISE A PUPPY

by Suzanne Clothier

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Not too long ago, I read about a study that showed that when recorded birdsong was played to plants, it served to prepare the plants for morning and the coming light. Hearing the birdsong, the plants underwent specific changes that allowed them to make good use of the sunlight. The point of the article was that greenhouse operators using artificial lighting would be wise to use this simple approach to help plants use the light as effectively as physiologically possible.

When we raise puppies, it would be nice to know that there was something as simple as recorded birdsong to help trigger our puppies' minds so that our interactions with them would have the best possible effects. But puppies aren't plants - they're complex creatures zooming along at an astounding pace on their developmental timetable. Compounding it all is the reality that while we are well meaning, we are still just humans trying to raise a baby dog. Hilary Clinton may or may not be right that it takes a village to raise a child; it definitely does take a pack to raise a puppy. In taking a puppy to raise, we become a substitute canine family. This is no easy task.

By the time the puppy is 7 weeks old, Nature has prepared the puppy to form deep bonds - in the world, with the pack around him; as a domestic dog, to form bonds with us, his substitute family. This bond is heartwarming and charming - what is more adorable than a little puppy trustingly chugging along behind you? It is also absolutely practical: this behavior is what will keep the puppy alive, fed, protected and educated. From 7-12 weeks of age, the puppy is amazingly open to (even eager for) relationships - relationships with almost anyone who will allow it. It is at this stage that flock guardian breeds are placed with the sheep; the poor misguided dears grow up feeling quite fond toward their woolly family and as impressive adult dogs will protect the flock with passion and skill. Given that a puppy can be convinced that a relationship with a sheep is a good thing, it is small wonder that puppies are just as willing to look at the average human being and think, "There is a God - and my, what big shoes God has. . ."

But possible problems are already germinating, even at this tender age. Even though a puppy is quite willing to develop relationships with all and sundry (even sheep), he does come to the table with some expectations. He can't help it. These expectations are hard-wired into his canine brain. He also has needs, ones that are typically met in a "natural" setting.

The puppy expects that there are rules in the world. His mother had them and reinforced them according to her personal mothering style. Even his siblings had some rudimentary rules, which were enforced through clumsy but oddly effective ways. (Fat puppies learn quickly that you can get much of what you want by simply sitting on a less hefty puppy. Biting hard on a rival's ear or lip can also be very effective.) Even at the tender age of 7 weeks old, the puppy is watching you, trying to figure out what the rules are. Where he sees uncertainty or inconsistency, his canine mind cannot help but make note of this. As he grows, he may feel the need to test the weak areas in order to clarify what the rules may or may not be. We expect this at some level - after all,

human teenagers routinely "test" their parents to find out where the boundaries may be. What we don't expect (or don't know or simply forget) is how quickly puppies move from the early stage of congenial agreement into the testing phase in just a matter of weeks, not the years like a human child.

The dog - like all social beings - is born with an understanding that there is power equal to, greater than and less than his own. He is (eternally) interested in seeing where you, the neighbors, the cat next door and the Poodle he just met fall on the power scale. Though he cannot articulate the concept, your puppy expects that leadership will be provided for him, or lacking that, he may have to be in charge as he matures. Like all social beings, he'd prefer that his leader(s) be calm, consistent, and clear while also being benevolent, protective and aware. And being a dog in all his waking moments, he assumes that you are a leader for him in your every waking moment.

A puppy (or even an adult dog) cannot understand that your life is not devoted to being a "leader among dogs" 24 hours a day or that you play many roles as spouse/parent/child/worker/friend. Though dog leader/puppy raiser/trainer may be only a part-time job for YOU, it does not change the fact that your puppy is a puppy 24 hours a day. Gaps in the leadership you provide for him will impact on the long-term relationship between you and your puppy. Depending on the individual dog, the breed and the situation, a lack of good leadership can lead to annoying and bratty behaviors, or it can lead to very serious consequences with the dog on a one-way trip to the Big Kennel in the Sky. Loving a puppy is not enough; he expects and deserves clear, consistent leadership. Being a dog leader means setting the rules for what is and is not acceptable behavior in your pack (with consideration to your rules being in line with the realities of dog behavior, culture and what constitutes reasonable expectations.)

Lacking the companionship and endless play his littermates would have provided, the puppy needs you to be his playmate. No excuses are truly satisfactory for a puppy who wants to play, play, play but has no one with whom to play. In a natural setting, a puppy wouldn't have to pester anyone or eat the linoleum out of boredom or bark in the backyard as a way to amuse himself. His littermates would be there, just as eager to play as he, littermates with which to chase, bite, wrestle, explore, etc. Although raising puppies together is NOT a good idea if you want a companion animal who is bonded to human beings and not to his puppy pals, it is a humbling moment when you watch puppies playing and realize that this is what you are going to replace in this puppy's life. Think of this the next time you find yourself exasperated with the puppy who won't stop pestering your other dogs to play, or who drops a toy invitingly at your feet for the millionth time, or who dances just out of your reach, reluctant to have a game end. Think of your puppy multiplied by 4 or 6 or 8 and what fun that many puppies would be having together. Then remember - you volunteered to be the substitute for that.

The puppy needs to learn to inhibit his impulses - in other words, to develop some self-control. One of my males, Banni, was a master at teaching puppies this critical social skill. Making a big show of a toy or delicious bone, Banni would lay down, placing his treasure in a precise spot calculated for a specific puppy and the specific lesson. Initially, the puppy would rush toward the bone and Banni would pick it up quickly while growling then walk away. With just one or two repetitions, the puppy learned to stop whenever Banni growled. Soon, he didn't have to growl at

all, but merely give the puppy "the look." You could see the puppy really wanted the bone, but was learning that wanting something and acting on that desire were quite different.

When dogs teach puppies to control themselves, they do not make excuses for the puppy: "Well, I was trying to teach him to leave my bone alone but he got so excited and I suppose it did smell pretty good, so I just let him have it." Humans make excuses for dogs, forgetting that among all social animals, self control is a learned skill that must be taught. We learned self-control because our parents taught us. For puppies to be welcome and enjoyable members of our substitute families, we need to teach them a great deal of self-control. Puppies do learn self control from other dogs but only concerning matters that are of interest to other dogs. A dog would not bother to teach a puppy that he should not get up on the sofa or steal food from the kitchen counter. These things don't matter much to dogs. But an older dog WILL teach a puppy that you should not steal another dog's meal or simply take a direct line of travel over another dog's body - much more polite to go around!

When teaching self-control, dogs are careful to make the lessons appropriate for the puppy's age. Before the puppy reaches 16-18 weeks of age, normal dogs are amazingly tolerant of puppy behavior. The careful observer will note a slow, subtle increase in what older dogs begin expecting from the puppy, but the overall impression is that a puppy can get away with almost anything. And the truth is, he can, thanks to the invisible (at least to humans!) but very real "puppy permit." What the puppy doesn't yet know is this: there's an expiration date on that puppy permit. When it expires, the rules can change quite quickly. Behavior that was acceptable one day may be completely unacceptable the next. With my own dogs, I've seen a puppy's permit expire over the course of a single morning. Just before breakfast, a four-month-old puppy galloped over one of my older dogs - nothing more than a dirty look and a grunt was what she got for this behavior. Later that day, the puppy did the same thing and was shocked when the adult dog leaped up fiercely snarling and barking in displeasure. After a few repetitions over the next few days, the puppy learned to politely walk around - not over! - other dogs.

The expiration date is usually at 16-20 weeks of age, and corresponds with hormonal shifts in the puppy's body. Once the hormonal shift occurs, the puppy will find much less tolerance from the dogs around him, and increasingly, he will be expected to act in a more mature fashion. Smart puppy owners keep an eye on the calendar too, allowing puppies to be puppies under some broad but consistent guidelines. Very slowly - almost imperceptibly, you begin to ask for a little more self control, a little more respect, a little more responsibility from the puppy but never losing sight of the fact that the puppy permit is still in force. Once the permit has expired, the wise handler can act just like a wise dog, and begin to push a little harder and expect more from the puppy.

From the best puppy raising dogs I've known, here are a few pointers for humans trying to raise a puppy:

- Tolerate puppies - they know not what they do
- Teach puppies - they know not what to do
- Be consistent with puppies - they forget things quickly
- Keep lessons short - puppies are easily distracted

- Puppies need to play - that why puppies are born in litters
- Good social skills & manners are made, not born
- Remember that puppy permits have expiration dates
- Don't wait till the puppy has stolen your bone to teach him about manners
- Be careful what you teach a puppy - someday, he might be in charge
- Tired puppies are always good puppies