

When should I start training my dog?

By Linda Michaels

Why should I train my dog?

Training the dog you love is one of the best ways to insure a great relationship that lasts a lifetime. Training your dog deepens the bond between you and your dog and makes home life more manageable and comfy for you both. Dogs like to do "jobs" and they also appreciate structure and boundaries in life just as psychological research shows that children do. Positive Reinforcement training is an effective dog-friendly and powerful method of training your Fifi or Bowser.

What exactly is Positive Reinforcement Training?

Positive Reinforcement dog training uses rewards and affection to train your dog. Just as humans work for rewards, so do dogs, dolphins, chimpanzees and all living things. It's not a theory but a scientifically proven effective method of training. It was first demonstrated in research by B.F. Skinner and presented in his renowned treatise, *The Behavior of Organisms* (Skinner, 1938). Positive Reinforcement is based on the principle that dogs and all animals will repeat behaviors that have benefited them in the past. It works and dogs love it!

I don't really have the time to train my dog. Is there a short-cut?

Not really, but once you become familiar with Positive Reinforcement techniques it becomes easier and easier. Some trainers use correction-based training and promise quick results. We don't find this type of training to be dog-friendly, effective in the long run or nurturing for a good relationship with your beloved dog. Lasting good behavior becomes a habit and an automatic response when your dog learns what to do... not just what not to do.

You can practice in 3 sessions per day at home of 5-10 minutes each. You can practice during commercials if you watch TV. Training lessons and practice sessions are designed to teach new things. Once your dog "gets it", start using the newly learned behaviors in everyday life. Most people find that a lifetime of good, family-friendly behavior is the greatest pay off they can imagine and well worth the time spent.

Is it best to wait until my dog is 4 or 6 months old to start formal training?

It's no longer believed by most trainers and most veterinarians that waiting is the best approach. Socialization is the most important skill your dog will ever learn and most vets today feel the need to acquire socialization skills trumps the possible risk your dog may have to disease exposure. Early socialization to all types of people, other dogs and moving objects, will largely determine whether you have an enjoyable or a stressful life with your dog. Your puppy's critical period of development is between the ages of 4 weeks and 4 months. Your puppy will be learning about her place in the world each day she explores her environment. Whether she learns how best to fit in with the family or just learns how to do more dog stuff will depend in part on what age you decide to train. We like to see dogs training at approximately 9 weeks of age and after at least one round of core vaccinations. Of course, following your veterinarian's recommendation is best.