

GUIDE
DOGS



**Guide Dogs' Puppy
Development and
Advice Leaflet
No. 5 Obedience**



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Teaching obedience to guide dog puppies

Qualified guide dogs are trained to respond promptly to standard obedience commands and exercises, when given one vocal prompt by the handler in conjunction with the appropriate hand signal, in all situations and environments. It is acceptable at the end of puppy walking for a puppy however, to occasionally require reinforcement in some situations and environments, for instance situations off the lead, in order to achieve responses to these commands and exercises.

To put this more simply, the aim when teaching basic obedience responses is to ensure that your puppy will respond to any of your vocal commands promptly and consistently. On the surface this appears to be a straightforward aim but achieving it is a time consuming process which requires you, as the puppy's handler, to be patient, firm, fair and above all extremely consistent. It is hoped the advice below, in conjunction with the guidelines and support you receive from your Puppy Training Supervisor, will enable you to achieve this aim.

Obedience remains the cornerstone of all dog training and consequently, the basis for all guide dog training remains the puppy's responsiveness to the vocal commands and prompts from the trainer or handler. These can only be developed over time by the consistent application of obedience commands. Without this responsiveness to the handler, training can be very difficult for the puppy and the chances of failure increase. Imagine trying to learn something without listening to the teacher!

In order to develop our dogs' responsiveness and understanding of the commands we use, you will be asked to teach your puppy a number of set obedience exercises which, when practised regularly, will help gain a prompt response when a command is given.

The standard obedience commands and exercises are: "Sit", "Sit and wait", "Down", "Down and stay", "Stand", "Stand and wait", "Heel" and "Come" (see Recall documentation for development of "Come" command).

Before discussing how to teach each of these responses, we must first understand how we communicate effectively with dogs and puppies.

Dogs and puppies communicate in a different way to us, so it is important that we try to communicate with them in a way which they understand. The majority of human communication centres on our language. However, dogs and puppies communicate with each other in a variety of different ways; they use their body positioning, posture and eye contact to convey intentions and desires. They also use a variety of sounds and tones to express their feelings. By understanding this we can use similar signals to help our dogs improve their understanding of what we want them to do.

Body language

By changing our posture and stance we can change an animal's perception of us. An upright, tall and straight stance is generally seen as confident and commanding, whereas a lower and open posture usually portrays a playful or welcoming impression. We can therefore use our stance to encourage or discourage particular actions or behaviours in our dogs. The way in which we apply physical handling is also important. Calm, slow strokes running in the same direction will soothe and relax your puppy, whereas ruffling fur, fast patting and 'wrestling' with your puppy will promote excitement.

Tone of voice

The way we use our voice is crucial when communicating with a puppy. Short commands, rather than long conversations, are required. Clear tones are usually best associated with commands e.g. "Sit" whereas warm, gentle and long sounds are usually associated with praise, e.g. "gooood booooyy". Gruff tones can be used for control with commands such as "off" and "no". Calm, quiet and positive tones should be used to provide reassurance. Remember there is no need to shout... puppies have excellent hearing!

Eye contact

Staring directly at a puppy may be a very dominant action, however eye contact can also be effectively used in a more subtle manner to gain attention, to praise, to direct and control a dog, very much as humans do to each other. Although useful to aid initial learning and understanding, it must be remembered that guide dog owners are unable to use this tool effectively to achieve the final aim, so responses should eventually be achievable without using eye contact.

By using different combinations of the above you will learn to communicate with your puppy effectively. With effective communication your puppy will learn quickly, resulting in the minimum of stress for you and your puppy. In addition to your communication techniques there are two other principles you can apply to help your puppy learn quickly. These are timing and consistency.

Timing

Any instruction, praise or control should be timed as accurately as possible, in order to help your puppy learn. The closer we present our consequence to the desired behaviour, the more likely the puppy is to understand which aspect of its behaviour the consequence is linked to. Research suggests that a delay of more than 0.5 seconds will slow learning considerably.

This means that our timing must be spot on if we are to make the most of a learning experience. If we administer praise (positive reinforcement) for a prompt response to a command, we must do so almost instantaneously for the puppy to detect the relevance of the reinforcement. Likewise, the same is true for correction of an inappropriate behaviour, which is why correction should only be given at the time the inappropriate behaviour is occurring.

Consistency

By using the same commands, voice and gestures for a specific command or action, your puppy will understand what you require. It is essential that you and anyone else who handles your puppy understands this and applies the same principles. Inconsistent handling will confuse the puppy, which will lead to a breakdown in responses and may induce stress.

Getting started 6 – 12 weeks of age

Teaching the puppy its name

Before trying to develop obedience responses, we must first ensure that we have some response from the puppy by teaching it its name. This can be done by using natural opportunities when the puppy is approaching or looking towards you. By using the puppy's name with a light and positive voice in conjunction with an open and friendly body posture, the puppy will have a positive association with its name and your use of it. By giving vocal or physical praise as soon as the puppy responds to you (remember timing) the puppy's response to you will improve. Once a dependable response to its name has been achieved we can start to informally teach some basic obedience commands.

Before trying to do this we must consider the environment we need to use, our approach, and the equipment required.

Environment

Initially the environment should be quiet and distraction free (or as near as possible). Initial training exercises should be carried out inside the home environment before you consider progression to the garden.

When should we carry out obedience exercise training?

There are certain times that should be avoided, especially with a very young puppy – these include when the puppy is tired, prior to feeding or at times of excitement in and around the house. Obedience training can be carried out at any other time but make sure that the length of each session is appropriate to the concentration span of your puppy. This will depend on your puppy's age and prior learning experience.

Handler approach

The approach you take during a teaching exercise is critical. It is essential that you only teach when you have the time to do so and when you yourself feel relaxed with sufficient reserves of patience. Concentrating on how the puppy perceives you by your posture, voice and attitude will assist your puppy's learning.

Equipment

Before starting your training session, ensure that you have all the equipment you require to hand, e.g. leads, collars, toys and rewards etc. By having everything you need close by, your training session will flow and this will help maintain the puppy's concentration.

Commands and actions to teach

Your supervisor will show you how to initially introduce these three commands.

Sit

The aim is to ensure your puppy sits when given the command. Ideally the puppy should sit upright and straight, moving its back legs to its front ones when assuming the position. However you should be aware that it may take the puppy sometime to develop this technique as its coordination and muscles are not yet fully developed, thus you should not be overly concerned with a young puppy's sit.

The sit should be initiated in the house for the first few days with the puppy off the lead. Use the puppy's name or a lure to encourage the puppy to look upwards and naturally sit, whilst at the same time asking the puppy to "sit" but only as the puppy starts to sit. Give lots of praise to ensure the action is repeated when you ask next time.

You will see that on occasions the puppy will sit without being asked, as it is normal dog behaviour. Try to capitalise on this by using the "sit" command and praise when this happens.

Down

The aim is to ensure your puppy lies down on the floor in a relaxed manner when given the command "down". Again this can be initiated in the house and is best achieved when the puppy starts from a sitting position. By gaining the puppy's attention and using a lowered, positive body positioning, you can encourage the puppy to the floor using a lure. As the puppy begins to assume a lying position, give the "down" command and follow it with praise to ensure a positive association with the position.

As with the "sit" command, you will see situations where this action is carried out without a command. If you use the command "down" and praise in these situations you can help the puppy develop a positive association between the action and command.



Wait

This is used to encourage your puppy to stay in its current position and location whilst remaining attentive to the handler. This command is often used in conjunction with the “sit” and “stand” responses. To introduce the command, start with the puppy in a sitting position. Gain the puppy’s attention and give the command “wait” using the “wait” hand signal. This is done by showing the puppy the flat of your hand (like a policeman stopping traffic). Stand upright and remain stationary for a few seconds before bending back down to the puppy to give praise.

Over the next few weeks, try to move away from the puppy and increase the time frame, little by little, whilst the puppy stays still. A calm, positive and reassuring voice will help the puppy remain relaxed and still, and some eye contact can be helpful. Where possible use natural situations where you and the puppy are waiting, to further reinforce this command, i.e. at the front door.

When the initial association between command and response has been learned, you can then start to give the command and expect a response.

Once you have achieved a reliable response to these commands, you can try and carry out the exercises in the garden (remember to keep the puppy on a lead to aid safety and control). You can also become more animated or relaxed in your handling as the situation dictates, and use varying degrees of eye contact and hand signals as well as reducing lure use.

Remember to give firm, but positive, commands to aid your puppy’s understanding and try to avoid repeating commands. If the puppy has heard the command, there should be no need to repeat it over and over again as this will only serve to break down the association between command and response.



Progression and development of responses at

13 – 16 weeks of age

By correctly solving a problem in the initial stages, you can prevent behaviour problems emerging during training.

As the puppy grows we can start to progress responses further and start to introduce more commands.

In order to develop responses the puppy knows well at home, consider changing environments to those which have more or different distractions, for example carry out obedience exercises when walking on the street, or prior to free running (the puppy should be on a lead during obedience exercises). Also make use of natural situations which arise e.g. when putting the puppy into the car, entering shops etc.

It may also be appropriate to take your puppy to a dog training class, however please speak to your supervisor before enrolling in a club or taking your puppy to any training sessions.

New commands to introduce

Stay

This command is used only in conjunction with the “down” command, and requires the puppy to stay in the “down” position. Once established the puppy will learn that when told to stay in this “down” position it is likely to be there for some time, so attention on the handler is not required. This is likely to be used when lying under the table in a restaurant or on its bed in a working office etc.

This command can be introduced in the same way as the “wait” command, the only difference being that the puppy will be lying down and the command is “stay”. Techniques for progression are the same as with the “wait” command, however it is important that your puppy does not learn to jump up for praise at the end of the exercise and break the response as a result. Ensure that praise to mark the end of the exercise is given when the puppy is still lying down.

Stand

The aim of the “stand” command is for the puppy to assume the standing position on command. The puppy should stand fairly stationary, facing the same direction as the handler.

This response can be best initiated from a sitting position, and can be naturally introduced during grooming and checking routines. By using a lure and drawing it away and ahead of the sitting puppy, keeping it level with the puppy nose, the puppy is likely to pursue the lure and move into a standing position. By using a calm positive voice and the “stand” command just prior to the puppy moving into position, the association between command and response can be developed. Close timing of reward and praise will again ensure this response is a pleasurable one.

Be aware of where you position yourself; it is easier if the puppy is encouraged to get up towards the handler. Young puppies may not stand still for long so slowly build up the time you expect the puppy to stand for. Light, upward pressure using the back of your hand underneath the puppy’s belly may help to provide additional support.

Once this action can be achieved on request, the “wait” command can be introduced to ensure the position is held for longer periods of time.

Heel

The “heel” command is used to prompt the puppy to return to the “heel” position when required. The “heel” position refers to the puppy’s position in relation to its handler. The correct position will see the puppy standing on the handler’s left hand side, close to and facing the same direction as the handler with its shoulders in line with the handler’s legs.

There are a number of ways to encourage a puppy to come to heel. Guide Dogs prefers a method called the ‘continental heel’, in which the puppy is brought to heel using the lead and body positioning whilst it remains on the left hand side of the handler. Because puppies and handlers have different abilities and needs, this technique will be demonstrated to you on an individual basis by your supervisor.

16 weeks of age onwards

At 16 weeks of age your puppy should have gained an understanding of the commands and responses mentioned above. The aim now is to continually develop the puppy’s responses to the commands, so that by the end of puppy walking the minimum input from the handler is required to gain a response from the puppy.

Although your puppy may have started to respond well at this stage, please be aware its performance may drop from time to time over the next few months. Your puppy will undergo a number of physical and temperamental changes over the remaining time with you, and as a result it is expected that responses may be inconsistent from time to time. Do not worry if this is the case, but please do report any problems to your supervisor and consult with them to find solutions.

In order to strengthen responses to obedience commands, we need to begin reducing support and guidance during the command response stage. Remember we are no longer teaching the command, but expecting the response. This can be achieved by gradual progression of the following techniques:

Reduce the amount of lure use

You may have used toys or food to initially gain a response. By reducing the use of this prompt you can encourage the puppy to look and listen to you rather than concentrate solely on the lure.

Increase the time span for stays and waits

This should be done gradually – keep in mind that we do not want the puppy to break the command, so make the time frame just long enough to improve the response without the puppy moving.

Increase the distance between puppy and handler

Gradually lengthening the distance between puppy and handler during the “wait” or “stay” commands will assist with developing your puppy’s concentration. As with the “wait” or “stay” command, this needs to be carried out gently and gradually to prevent the puppy moving and breaking your commands. Initially, this should be introduced with the puppy on a lead and as responses become more solid, then exercises may be introduced off the lead. In time you may even be able to disappear out of sight briefly with your puppy remaining stationary, secure in the knowledge you will soon return.

Introduce more distractions

By introducing distractions we test the puppy's ability to focus on and respond to the handler. Introduce low distractions to start with, and remember we do not want to distract the puppy to the point where he/she ignores commands. Toys, environment, other puppies and even food can be used to test the puppy's ability.

Carry out exercises off lead

Any off lead exercises should only be carried out in a secure safe environment. This is a real test of a puppy's response to commands, and its ability to respond without the lead as a controlling or security factor. This is a good exercise to work towards as it also helps develop your vocal intonation and flexibility.

Phase out physical cues using body positioning and gestures

Puppies will pick up cues from the gestures, body positioning and eye contact used by the handler. By making these gestures less obvious over a period of time, we can encourage the puppy to listen to us rather than work out what we want just by watching us. This can even be progressed to the point where unknown, irrelevant or conflicting gestures are given whilst giving vocal commands.

Use natural situations to improve responses

The chances to carry out obedience exercises will become more frequent as you increase the time you spend out and about with your puppy. Later, when you introduce steps, doors, shops and transport etc, these situations can be used to gain further responses to commands such as "sit", "wait", "down", "heel" and "come".

Use other appropriate handlers

To ensure that your puppy will respond to commands for all handlers, not just yourself, other handlers may be used. However, if the handler is unknown to the puppy, this may cause confusion, and if the handler is inexperienced in Guide Dogs techniques, they may not act appropriately. This technique is, therefore, best carried out under the supervision of your supervisor.

For additional ways to progress obedience responses please speak to your supervisor. Please remember to keep in touch with your supervisor, and keep them up to date with your puppy's development in this crucial area. If problems do arise, your supervisor can advise you on alternative options.

These points must be followed at all times to support the agreed training process within the puppy walking department of Guide Dogs. Copyright © 2014

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