A guide to understanding your guide dog puppy

In order to effectively communicate with, socialise and train your puppy, it is important that you have a basic understanding of why your puppy behaves as it does.

By focusing on particular areas of dog behaviour it may be possible to further understand and explain the actions of puppies and dogs. These areas include:

- the ancestry of the domestic dog
- the dog’s basic senses
- the traits and characteristics of dogs and the specific breeds that Guide Dogs use
- how dogs communicate with one another
- how humans should communicate with dogs
- the effects of physical maturity on dog behaviour

The subsequent development information has been provided to you to give a basic understanding of the dog behaviours that you may see from your puppy. Further details are available from a number of sources, including the reading list at the end of this booklet and your puppy training supervisor. If this information raises any questions or concerns please contact your supervisor, who will be very happy to discuss them with you.
The ancestry of the domestic dog

All breeds of domestic dog throughout the world still have a genetic link with their ancestor the wolf. Domestication of the wolf started around 15,000 years ago when man began to capitalise on its abilities to hunt for food and to protect the people and families within their settlements. By breeding from the tamest wolves, more social and biddable animals were developed. As you would expect, the first domesticated dogs looked, and in some ways behaved, very similarly to that of wolves. However with selective breeding over thousands of years for size, colour, temperament and behaviour, the dog has now been categorised as a different species and consists of the multitude of dog breeds that exists today. However, despite this, domestic dogs still exhibit a number of innate behaviours. The extent to which an individual's behaviour relates to that of its ancestry will vary from individual to individual and from breed to breed. You may see some of these behaviours exhibited by your guide dog puppy, for example:

Scent marking

This behaviour is carried out by a dog to emphasise its presence to other dogs within the environment, by urinating and/or ground scratching. In the wild, dogs use this method to mark out their territory and to communicate with others in the vicinity. This is most commonly seen in the domestic dog when adolescent males ‘cock’ their legs or when pre-season or in season bitches ‘mark’ by spot urination. You may even see this in your young puppy when it shows a preference to spend in areas that it has already marked.

Rolling

Some dogs will roll in the foulest smelling substances, including fox faeces and decaying animals, whilst others will roll in sand or long grass. Although what stimulates this instinctive behaviour is still widely speculated, one of the stronger arguments is that it was originally carried out to disguise the dog’s natural scent and improve success when hunting.

Carrying

Wild dogs carry their food back to the family group for sharing or storing. These carrying and retrieving behaviours have been selectively maintained by man and are evident in breeds such as Golden Retrievers and Labradors. In the home, puppies show this by carrying their toys, bones, bedding and/or when bringing articles during greeting.

Digging

Digging is a behaviour derived from the storage of food and/or the maternal need to create a den. This instinct is still present in domesticated dogs even though they are well fed and housed. You may witness this behaviour if your puppy hides biscuits, toys or chews in its bed, or more blatantly when digging holes in the garden.

Vocalisation

Dogs naturally live within groups and as a result they need to communicate with one another over a variety of distances. A common vocalisation is howling, and this can be heard in domestic dogs, usually when left alone, as an attempt to communicate with others. Your puppy may well try to communicate in this way when initially settling into your home or when learning to be left.
Herding, stalking and chasing

These are basic behaviours required during hunting and are necessary for the survival of predatory animals. As a result, varying degrees of these behaviours will be exhibited by your puppy. Herding breeds, such as collies and german shepherds, show a stronger instinct to carry out these chase behaviours. However all dogs run or chase to a degree and most shake toys during play; the basis for this behaviour is hunting.

Licking

Licking is used instinctively by young puppies to encourage an adult dog to regurgitate food. Wild dogs are weaned onto solid food with the partially digested contents of an adult’s stomach; this is why dogs will eat their own vomit if allowed to. Licking is also seen during social grooming and you may also see this behaviour in your puppy when it licks you or others.

Gorging

In the wild, the faster a dog can eat, the more it is likely to consume before a possible challenger for that food comes along. For this reason, some puppies may instinctively bolt their food if there is a perceived threat of it being removed or stolen by another individual; this can explain why your puppy may eat faster in the presence of other dogs or members of the family. Tug of war games are also derived from eating and gorging, stemming from conflict over food.

Mounting

This is obviously a sexual activity and may be seen occasionally during play sessions when puppies get over-excited. Mounting may also be used to assert dominance over others. NB: This behaviour can be displayed by both dogs and bitches.

Bedding

This refers to the instinctive circling behaviour carried out by some dogs before lying down which is designed to flatten the surface before the dog settles. You may also see your puppy rearrange its bedding before it settles. Similar behaviour may also be seen before your puppy relieves itself; again to flatten the ground’s surface.

Dog senses

Although dogs have the same basic senses as man, they have developed over time to differing degrees to best support the survival of the different species and in particular in dogs, the predatory behaviour of hunting. However through selective breeding, man has also manipulated the extent to which many breeds are able to use their senses. For example, selective breeding of the bloodhound has developed its skull in such a way as to encourage scenting, by creating folds of skin that fall over the eyes when the head is down, and ears that trail the floor to collect additional scent.
To help explain dog senses in a little more detail the following information regarding the five basic senses may be of interest:

**Sight**

Dogs’ visual perception differs greatly from ours. Born with their eyes closed, a puppy’s eyes usually open between ten to fourteen days of age and their eyesight is fully developed by four weeks of age. Due to the design of a dog’s eyes, the ability to focus on detailed images and to see colour is fairly limited and far less than a human’s ability, however the ability to see movement and distance especially in low lighting conditions is far greater than ours. Depending on the breed, a dog’s visual field is also wider than ours; on average dogs can see nearly 240 degrees of field as opposed to our 180 degrees; therefore it would be incorrect to assume that a dog sees the world as humans do.

**Hearing**

Dogs hear very differently from the way humans do. To explain this in more detail, the aspects of hearing can be broken into three parts: the acuity of hearing; the range of hearing; and the location of sound direction. Unlike us, dogs are born with their ears closed but they normally open ten days after birth.

A dog’s range of hearing (i.e. what it can physically hear) is vast. Although low level frequency sounds are similar to our range, a dog can perceive much higher frequencies than we can. As a result, dogs can differentiate between sounds more efficiently than us and also hear things that we cannot detect. Their hearing acuity is also greater than ours as they can hear fainter sounds coming from approximately four times the distance that we can. Finally, dogs can also detect where sounds are coming from with great accuracy. This is partly due to their increased ability to detect a greater range of sounds as already discussed, but also because they have the ability to move their ears to assist with location detection. Watch a german shepherd locate a sound source and you will see ear movement in action!

**Smell**

The human’s ability to use their sense of smell has declined during evolution. However, in dogs the opposite is true. Because dogs communicate and hunt using scents, their ability to use their sense of smell has greatly developed. As a result, conservative estimates suggest that a dog’s sense of smell may be a hundred times more effective than ours.

**Taste**

A dog’s ability to taste is pretty similar to that of a human. However, because a dog’s ability to taste is less developed than some other senses and is closely linked to its sense of smell, it is often the case that if a dog finds the smell of something appealing it will assume it tastes good!

**Touch**

Dogs experience their environment through tactile information in a variety of ways but in particular with their feet or mouth. In addition, dogs gain tactile feedback from the environment via their coat and whiskers as each hair follicle contains sensory nerve fibres. This is important to consider during grooming and checking, as physical contact plays an important part in guide dog work as our dogs must be happy to wear a harness and manage the physical demands experienced when working as a qualified guide dog.
The traits and characteristics of dogs including the breeds used as guide dogs

When analysing the temperament and work performance of a guide dog or guide dog puppy, staff and volunteers frequently refer to the dogs' basic traits or temperamental components which form the puppy’s general character. It is important that everyone involved with the development and training of our dogs and puppies uses the same descriptions to avoid confusion or misrepresentation when discussing a particular puppy or training issue.

The following list outlines the main terminology used to describe temperament as well as a brief description of their meanings. If you require more information regarding these explanations please contact your supervisor.

Willingness
The puppy’s natural desire to work with and please the handler.

Distraction
Anything within the environment which diverts the puppy’s attention away from the task in question or from the handler.

Sensitivity
This is the puppy’s instinctive reaction to sound and touch which affects its response to the handler and the environment. This can be divided into:

Hearing sensitivity – this is the puppy’s reaction to sound.

Body sensitivity – this is the puppy’s reaction to physical touch and proximity of objects or the handler.

Suspicion
The puppy’s reaction to sights, sounds, or smells within the environment. The puppy’s reaction may range from cautious to fearful. This is behaviour is normally exhibited when the puppy encounters new or unusual objects.

Excitability
This is the puppy’s natural readiness to be excited by a variety of stimuli including objects, people or situations.

Aggression
This is a natural behaviour which the puppy may show in order to deal with a perceived or actual conflict or threat.

Responsiveness
The puppy’s ability to react as requested when prompted by the handler or environment.
**Attentiveness**
This is the puppy’s ability to focus and concentrate on a particular task or on the handler.

**Dominance and submissiveness**
The degrees by which a puppy is ready to challenge or yield.

**Adaptability**
This is the puppy’s ability to cope with changes to its environment and routine.

**Confidence**
This is the puppy’s level of self-assurance.

**Self-interest**
This is the puppy’s desire to please itself.

**Initiative**
This is the puppy’s ability to be able to think ahead and make decisions independently.

**Stress resilience**
This is the ability of the puppy to cope with stressful situations.
Breed characteristics

The breeds preferred as guide dogs come primarily from the gundog and herding breeds. The most commonly used gundog breeds are labradors, golden retrievers, flat coated retrievers and curly coated retrievers. Herding breeds include german shepherds and border collies. Puppies from these groups are used because of a number of inherent characteristics including sociability, willingness to please, ability to learn quickly, as well as physical size upon maturity; these characteristics have been selectively bred into these breeds for centuries, thus making them more suitable for the role of guiding.

How dogs communicate

Dogs convey their intentions and feelings using a wide range of complex and sometimes very subtle body signals, facial expressions, scents and vocal expressions. A combination of all of these signals may be used during communication, so when assessing your puppy’s state of mind try to observe them holistically and not just one specific aspect e.g. tail position or posture. Although you will see similarities, signals vary from puppy to puppy, dependent on breed, temperament, age and experience. It is important to understand that unlike humans, puppies do not have the ability to disguise their feelings.

To help illustrate the communication displays used by dogs, the following diagrams help illustrate specific aspects of body language. However please remember that your puppy may communicate slightly differently. Experience of ‘reading’ your puppy will be required to fully understand what it is trying to communicate.

Relaxed posture

Confidence might adapt this posture, e.g. raised but relaxed tail carriage, forward ear carriage, relaxed tail posture, and facial expression, with a loose stance.

Stressed/anxiety

Tail down, body lowered, ears back. Erratic movement. May pant and lick lips.

Dominance/aggression

Stiff tail, raised and bristled. Hackles raised. Ears upright and forward. Lips raised and teeth visible. Stiff-legged upright stance. A dog may do all of these things but without the lip raising and hackle raising.
**Fear/total submission**
Rolls on back to expose stomach and throat. Ears flat and back. Head turned to avoid eye contact. Tight lips. Usually remains still at times of threat.

**Alert and attentive**
Horizontal tail carriage, may move slightly. Ears upright, may move to detect sound source, upright body position. Mouth generally closed with head forward facing.

**Submissive**
Tail down (may wag quickly), lowered body posture. Ears flattened and back. Eye contact sought but not maintained. Smooth forehead. Lips taut (may appear to smile).

**Fear/aggression**

**Playful**
Tail upright, yet not bristled, ears up. Front legs lowered with high back end. Face relaxed.

Dogs use ‘play bows’ to incite play with one another.

Dogs may use play sessions to assert themselves over one another, in a less formal way than confrontation. If you watch dogs playing, you may see dogs alternate between dominance and more submissive signals frequently.

**Dominant and aggressive**
Teeth bared, ears upright and forward, direct eye contact.

**Attentive**
Upright ears, fixed gaze, forward facing yet expression relaxed.

**Fearful or submissive**
Tight lips, ears flattened and back, head position lowered.
Facial expressions

A puppy will display a wide range of subtle facial expressions to enhance body posture communication. Again these signals should not be used in isolation to identify a puppy’s intentions but should be ‘read’ in conjunction with all the other communication signals available at the time.

Eye contact

This is an extremely important communication method between puppies. Direct eye contact is usually displayed by a confident puppy that is threatening or challenging, whereas an averted gaze is usually displayed by submissive types or as a calming signal to defuse a situation.

Ear positioning

A puppy’s ears have a wide range of movement. Although this is primarily to assist with detection of the source of a particular sound, puppies also use them to convey intentions and feelings. As a general guide, flattened, pinned-back ears can indicate fear, submission or intense concentration whereas erect ears suggest confidence, dominance or distraction.

Lip/muzzle position

The obvious signals given via the mouth are snarling, biting and snapping. This is usually an indication of aggression, either apprehensive or dominant. These behaviours should not be confused with mouthing which is usually displayed to seek attention. However there are a number of other signals using the mouth including yawning or lip licking which can both indicate anxiety or stress, and ‘smiling’ which is usually intended to display a submissive greeting.

Head position

Closely linked with body posture, is the way in which a puppy holds its head – it can give a clear communication to others regarding its intentions. An upright position usually indicates interest, confidence or dominance, whereas a lowered head can indicate distraction (by scent), apprehension, submission or fear.
Other communication methods

Sounds

As explained earlier, puppies have a high hearing ability. As a result puppies make a variety of sounds when communicating, including barking (a wide variety of barks exist and can convey protectiveness, surprise, excitement and much more), yelping, whining, howling, growling and whimpering etc. All individuals and breeds have a different array of sounds and as a result the intended communication of each puppy must be assessed as an individual.

Scent

With such a highly developed sense of smell it is of little surprise that puppies use scent to communicate in a number of ways. Puppies produce scent naturally, and this scent carries information to other puppies regarding sexual and status standing. Likewise puppies can detect pheromones given off by other living organisms including us, which give information regarding general mood, including fear and anger.

Physical contact

Puppies are tactile creatures and communicate with one another physically during greeting, play, attention seeking, grooming and fighting. This is evident when puppies give their paws, nibble, mouth, and bite each other. It can be natural for puppies to try to extend this behaviour towards people, although within guide dog puppies these behaviours must be discouraged.

How humans communicate with dogs

The relationship between a guide dog and its owner is a close one, assisted by the partnership’s ability to communicate effectively. The same should be true of all puppy and handler relationships, as without effective communication between one another, confusion can result which may foster undesired behaviour in a puppy.

Humans communicate primarily using the spoken word, the vast majority of which our puppies cannot comprehend. However, we also communicate in other ways too, for example by using the tone of our voice, eye contact, gestures and body posture but to name a few. For the most part our puppies are able to read these aspects of our communication well and this helps them to understand our intentions and desires. By ensuring we use these communication techniques clearly and consistently, alongside a limited vocabulary, we can very effectively train or handle a puppy. Despite what some people believe, puppies do not understand every word you say! To expand on this a little, the following communication methods will be explained in more detail:
Vocal communication

Puppies clearly understand some words or, more accurately, can learn an association between some words and actions. So, for example, the basic obedience commands of “sit” and “down” can be linked with the appropriate action. The most important consideration for a handler to make when using their voice, is the tone in which it is used. Firmer and sharper tones may convey displeasure or a command, whereas a lighter and softer intonation expresses pleasure, praise and comfort.

The volume of the handler’s voice is also important. Remember – puppies have great hearing, so volume should be adapted to suit the puppy’s needs, raised only to cover distance or to compete with other sound sources. It is essential that your voice is used consistently and clearly to ensure your puppy understands your intentions.

The timing of when you use vocal communication can also have a huge impact on what the puppy learns, both in terms of the commands and the praise that you use. More about this can be found in the section on dog learning theory.

Eye contact

As discussed earlier, direct eye contact can be seen as confident or threatening, whereas an averted or soft gaze can be seen as non-threatening or submissive. With this in mind, consider how you use your eye contact when handling your puppy, but remember that many guide dog owners do not have the ability to use this important method of communication.

Physical contact

Physical contact is usually used to elicit pleasurable feelings in a puppy such as when we praise them by stroking or grooming. However, lead control and rough play can be perceived as negative by a puppy and may communicate a different intention altogether. Thus every puppy must be treated as an individual; what is appropriate for one puppy may not be appropriate for another.

Body language

As discussed previously, this is a key area of communication for puppies and as such, our use of body language should loosely emulate that of a puppy. So for example an upright position is generally perceived by puppies to be a more confident posture whereas a lowered position i.e. bent over, is less so.

Dog understanding of body posture can clearly be seen during play sessions; if the handler adopts the play bow position, the puppy will usually respond playfully. In addition, we also use a variety of gestures and signals when communicating. When handling your puppy such signals can be of use to assist your puppy in its understanding of what you want it to do. For example, patting your thighs during recall to encourage contact, using the ‘policeman’s hand’ during wait or stay exercises, or just swinging your arm in the direction you want to go.

Remember, when communicating with your puppy try to use a combination of methods to ensure you are understood as clearly as possible.
The effects of physical maturity on puppy behaviour

As your puppy grows and matures a number of physical and temperamental changes will occur that may have an effect on its behaviour. The following information has been provided to help you to identify the causes and behaviours which may occur:

Teething
Puppies usually lose their first set of teeth between fourteen and twenty weeks of age. This can cause them some discomfort and you may find lost teeth and some bleeding from the mouth as a result. Behaviour changes usually include increases in incidents of chewing and a reluctance to eat. Medical symptoms may also occur including rashes on the skin, ear infections, eye discharge, smelly breath and diarrhoea.

Puberty in males
As with humans, puppies go through puberty as they become sexually mature. This stage can be expected from around six months of age. Few clinical signs are usually evident, although behaviour may start to change.

Although all puppies are different you may experience a number of behaviours from the following list:

• increases in scenting or sniffing on walks
• increased urination frequency as a result of marking
• more challenging behaviour towards handlers
• a break down in recall and obedience responses
• mounting behaviour
• leg cocking during urination
• increase in awareness or distraction by other dogs
• protection of territory or toys
• an increase in chewing incidents
Puberty in bitches

As with males, sexual maturity brings on the onset of puberty. Bitches can show behavioural changes from six months of age as they start to hormonally develop. From this time onwards they can come into ‘season’ which will be accompanied by clinical signs.

The following are the common signs of a bitch coming into season:

- she may curl her tail and arch her back, particularly when physically praised or during grooming
- there is usually a blood discharge (but not always)
- after being in season the blood discharge may become cream/clear in colour
- her mammary glands may become swollen
- a season usually lasts around twenty-one days

Security for bitches in season

When in season, please ensure that your puppy cannot escape from the house or garden, as straying or inappropriate mating is a possibility. Some bitches will go to great lengths to find a mate! She may dig under or jump over walls/fences. In addition the local dog population may try to gain access to the garden.

Mating behaviour

It is normal for dogs to tie or lock together when mating from as little as a few minutes up to over half an hour. If your puppy is ‘miss mated’ do not try to pull the dogs apart, but wait until they naturally separate in order to prevent injury to the dogs and to yourself. It is important to tell your supervisor as soon as possible; ideally within 24 hours so unwanted puppies can be prevented.

Exercise for bitches in season

Exercise routines during a season should be established with the advice of your supervisor and will depend on the area you live in and the temperament of your puppy. However, if exercising away from the garden, transportation to the exercise area must be made by car, as walking from home will leave a strong scent which will alert local dogs. Never free run in an open environment, as mating may occur. Your puppy must be kept on a lead until her season has finished. Remember even if your puppy is on a lead, this will not keep unwanted males away and therefore you need to be vigilant. Select an area where you know there will be few other dogs around.

General care for bitches in season

Although during their seasons bitches can behave uncharacteristically as a result of this physical development, they usually revert back to ‘normal behaviour’ once the season has ended (approximately twenty-one days). Handling at this time should be empathetic to meet your puppy’s needs; patience and understanding will be required.
Prior to a season you may witness a number of behavioural changes, such as:

- increases in urination frequency due to marking
- increase in general sensitivity levels
- increase in scenting or sniffing
- break down in recall and obedience responses
- increase in awareness or distraction by other dogs
- increases in attention-seeking behaviour
- excitability
- frequent self-grooming
- increases in challenging behaviour
- mounting behaviours
- protection of territory and toys
- increased chewing activities

Please contact your supervisor if you have any concerns about the behaviour of your puppy at any stage in its development.

**Suggested Reading list**

- **Know your dog** – Dr Bruce Fogle
- **Talk to your dog** – Susie Green
- **What’s my dog thinking** – Gwen Bailey
- **The perfect puppy** – Gwen Bailey
- **Do dogs need shrinks?** – Peter Neville
- **Puppy training the Guide Dogs way** – Julia Barnes
- **Think dog** – John Fisher
- **Ain’t misbehaving** – David Appleby
- **In Defence of Dogs** – John Bradshaw

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

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