

Thoughts on Socializing of Hunting Dog Puppies

With the new breeding season coming up, some of us will again face that exciting time when you go to pick up your new hunting buddy from the breeder. Most of us have some uncertain feelings about how to introduce the new pup into your family and home - after all there are the possible puddles on the rug to face, and so many things can go wrong. Here's some food for thought on how to socialize your pup and introduce him to his future life as a cooperative, reliable gun dog.

What is a good pup?

Of course, a good pup comes out of good (proven) parents, a clean kennel and a careful breeding program of a reputable breeder. Backyard litters seldom have the desired density of superior genes to be worth considering as a performance hunting dog. The best pup of the litter is the one you like best. Usually you can't predict a pup's natural ability at pickup-time. So go with what you like: color, temperament, size, etc. The bully of the litter is not always the best! Of course, pay close attention to undesirable traits, such as extreme dependence on litter mates (pup will never go somewhere alone!), shyness of "normal" situations (humans, other dogs, especially moving objects!) and any bodily fault.

Early development

According to scientists studying dog psychology, the young dog goes through several stages of imprinting. The most important and critical period to imprint your pup is between week 6 and 12. Generally, the sooner the dog comes into your home, the better, but there are disadvantages: The younger pup will be more prone to diseases and malnutrition. Also, it's a good idea to have the pup experience the first traumatic events (vaccination, tattooing) in the safety of the kennel with Mom and its litter mates. I personally like to pick up a pup at 8 weeks, but not later than 10-11 weeks. I always take my newly acquired pups inside the house. The worst you can do to a young pup is to lock him up in a cold unfamiliar kennel - he'll get the lonely bed blues! Never put him into a kennel with other dogs, no matter how "nice" the may be with junior! The best way to get your pup over the first days after leaving Mom is to take him inside your house and "use" his desire for warmth, contact and affection by giving him all these things, hereby bonding him to you. He will readily accept you as his new Mom and will look for your company!

House-keeping rules

From the first moment when junior gets inside your home there should be a set of rules he (and YOU!) adhere to at all times. Give him a place of his own (a crate that can be closed works best!) where he is expected to sleep and stay when you have no time for him. I personally take my pups into bed with me at night for the first month or so - simulating the environment he would grow up in hadn't you ripped him away from Mom! Personal body contact is what he needs most. Let him sleep on your lap, play with him on the floor, etc. -just touch him a lot. This will teach him the most important lesson of his life: Daddy is always good to me. During the day, junior should be sleeping in his crate, and when he wakes up, you should CARRY him outside to take care of his "business".

Pups have very little control over their bladders, so they should be let out every 2-3 hours at least during the day, and once or twice during the night. If you keep taking him out at the right time, he will NEVER mess in the house. It's your fault if he leaves a puddle on the rug. If the disaster has happened, however, do not treat junior harshly: a short shake and "NO" and out he goes to his usual doggie-john. Remember to praise him every time he does "his job" outside!

Playtime

Playing is the best way to give your pup a lot of confidence and love for you. If you can't play with a pup he'll become socially retarded, or may turn to be very independent or even into a fighter. Many dogs that grew up in the isolation of a kennel never learned to have fun with their handler, so they bugger off to find their excitement someplace else. I try not to let my pups play much with other dogs - they tune into a dog world and not into the human environment. The imprinting on humans creates dogs that are at home in both worlds. Any well socialized dog will always be trustworthy with other dogs, - which is not true for the opposite! Playtime creates cooperativeness and fine-tunes your pup into your personality.

Playing is also the best way to schedule juniors activity to the times when you have time for him; play before you need some time off, so he's asleep and out-of-the-way. Toys are a good distraction, but he should only have one or two - chewable if at all possible (no wood or plastic that can splinter!), all other items are off-limits. When you play with him, use HIS toys and nothing else. If he accidentally gets into some of your shoes etc., grab him gently by the neck, shake him in front of the item he wasn't supposed to touch, tell him "NO" and immediately start a new play with HIS toy. He'll learn to distinguish good from bad only when they are close together!

When playing, you should play like a dog, i.e. wrestle with junior. He loves to roll all over the floor with you, so get down to his level as often as you can. If he gets too rough, whine sharply - most likely he'll stop right away. After all, that's the response he got from his litter mates, so he should know it. He'll quickly learn that your "cry" means for him to soften up. This is very helpful if junior should ever get a bit rough with kids! If, however, he's not easily discouraged from biting your hands to pieces, grab him by the neck, shake him briefly and tell him "easy", then continue playing at a reduced excitement level. Fortunately, he'll tire quickly after a romp in the yard or house and then is likely to sleep for 1-3 hours (your free time!).

Conditioning or Training?

From day one, I use a whistle signal (double blast on a non-trilling whistle) and the dog's name whenever I want to call him. Get on your knees and call junior to you, praise and play when he comes to you. Before I put down his food dish in front of him, I always whistle the "come" signal, this will make him associate the signal with something pleasant. The idea behind this "conditioning" is to create associations between behaviors and rewards. In conditioning the dog "teaches himself", like what clues provide him with food etc. A good example is the young dog that runs to the front door when you take his leash: he has learned to associate your intent to take him for a walk (grabbing the leash) with the "exit". To the unconditioned dog, taking the leash means nothing because both leash and door are unrelated. Conditioning stands in contrast to

actual "force-training" where you will teach him certain behaviors by dominance and physical stimulation. For example, you will tap his rump with a switch to teach him sit, - you actually force him to comply with your wishes. Of course any kind of force is inappropriate for a little pup, but he's not too young to learn by conditioning! If done properly, you can teach a young dog a lot of life's essential lessons by conditioning alone. As he gets older, conditioning gradually merges into a force training program, but certain tasks will always remain strict conditioning exercises, such as blood tracking. No force in the world will make your dog track a wounded deer - only his conditioned response to the smell of blood (excitement, knowing there will be food, etc.) will make him track. The beauty of conditioned responses is that they are more or less fixed and not dependent on handler influences. A dog that has been conditioned properly will perform the task even when miles away from the handler, or under a new owner. He taught himself, so the handler is not important for the performance. Of course, there are many subjects you cannot teach by conditioning, that's where force training comes into play. A good example is retrieving: All my young pups are conditioned to chase and retrieve bumpers to hand, and they all will do this enthusiastically. At this time the pup retrieves reliably as long as he has fun doing it, which can be very long. And I almost bet that he doesn't have to have a strong retrieving instinct or be a "natural" retriever (which doesn't exist!). A good conditioning program will make him have fun while retrieving! But, you can't make him retrieve yet. However, once the pup gets to be 7 months old, he'll get force trained to retrieve, no matter if he has fun doing it or not. The need for force breaking may be dependent on the individual dog owner, to me it's indispensable.

In order for conditioning to be most effective, you should avoid under all circumstances to physically punish a pup personally. It does NOT mean that you shouldn't help him to teach himself to behave. The major difference is that you never appear as the threatening, bad guy that hurts little puppy dogs! It is critical that you remain extremely friendly during these early stages of learning. Junior should learn that the world turns ugly if he doesn't follow Dad's advice, but it's never Dad who is unpleasant. If he steals from the table, the table will bite back (mouse trap!) and immediately Daddy will call him and be very comforting. Or, if he scratches the door, a key ring will "jump" from the wall and scare him back to Daddy, who is extremely happy to see him. I call this the "GOD-EFFECT" because the young dog should not associate discomfort or "punishment" with the handler, but rather some mysterious force out there in the unfriendly world. He will learn that your "come"-command is a warning of some nasty thing that will happen to him (a handful of BB's peppered on this rump, for example!), and he can only get away from it by running to the shelter of your arms. Use situations to your advantage by calling him when you are sure he won't respond AND when you have the means to make him "obey" by scaring him back to you. Don't overdo it, but keep a constant schedule of conditioning experiences. Of course, conditioning also applies to the "NO" command, and -very importantly! - to the leash work. Junior should be exposed to the leash as soon as possible. When you reach for the leash and attach it to his collar he should be very happy - this means we're going someplace (incidentally, we never leave the house without being leashed and we spend most of our puppy time outside on a leash). Later the leash is your most important training tool, so it pays to make the dog love it above all things! Of course, we don't require junior to walk at a perfect "heel" right away, but we can already introduce some basics: Never let him chew on a leash (you're training young Houdini that way). Never let him win a fight against the leash. Never punish him with a leash (at least not when he's a little pup!) Make him walk at your left side and show him that running between your legs may be painful (with immediate praise and petting after he got

stepped on). As he grows, he should pull less and less on the leash, and when he's 4-5 months old he should heel nicely without pulling, etc. Another early conditioning experience involves the "SIT" command: when he sits voluntarily praise him while giving the "SIT" command (this is what other trainers call the "overlay" technique: you "overlay" the command over the behavior at the right time).

The reason why I'm so serious about the conditioning business is, because it facilitates force training so much. A dog that trusts the handler from puppyhood on will never get handshy, leash-wise or develop the arrogant attitude you often see in poorly socialized dogs. Even when you have to punish him, he'll trust you because deep in his brain there is a burnt-in message: "When in trouble, Daddy is my best buddy!"

Field experience

Of course, junior should go into the field as soon as possible. There he will learn different smells, terrain, animals and water. A great deal of conditioning takes place in the field, and a lot of "preferences" of a dog for certain game or habitats stem from childhood play in the woods. Initially, a pup's field of vision is limited (ca 30 yards in a 10 week old pup) so make sure he doesn't get lost. Show him interesting things, such as fresh tracks, birds, etc. Bring him up to a planted bird and let him chase it. Let him chase bumpers or balls, a bird wing on a string, etc. The more he sees, smells and hears the less trouble you will have with keeping his concentration later on. A pup that has "seen it all" is much easier to train! This is also the time to introduce him to gunshots, dead game, pasture animals, etc. He should learn to ride in the vehicle (always in a crate, never loose in the back of the truck!) as soon as possible.

Tracking is another thing I like to introduce right away. Make a little soupy sauce from his dinner, and lay a short (10-30 yards) trail by dripping a drop of dinner-soup onto the ground every 5-10 inches. Place his dish at the end (always hidden behind a tree or shrub!), walk back to the house in a wide circle (without crossing the trail!) and put junior on a long leash and a non-choking, soft collar. Keep him short on the leash and show him the start of the trail by pointing to the first soup spot, then let him follow the trail. If he strays off the trail, stop immediately, holding the leash firmly. Junior will now swing back and forth in front of you "like a pendulum". The moment he crosses the trail, gently give him some "rein" and thus help him onto the trail. Once at the end, praise him a lot and let him eat. A few of these trails, and you have laid the ground work for diligent nose work, cooperation and above all, concentration on scenting. Also, you can use situations when junior is a few yards away and not paying attention to you, to quickly disappear from his view. Sooner or later he will start tracking you down, and gets rewarded by an enthusiastic reception if he finds you. A dog that has been introduced to tracking from early on will never fail the rabbit track, or the drags as required in the performance tests of the German system. Unfortunately, too many dogs get exposed to their first drag when they are in their second year - much too late to "educate" a reliable tracker. The early bird catches the worm! Lastly, don't be disappointed if junior doesn't point right away. If he wants to grab things rather than point that's OK - in fact I prefer the gung-ho kind of a dog over the overly cautious canine that points out of insecurity. Pointing is mostly a training subject anyway, so he will learn it, just like the retrieving. You should concentrate on schooling his nose by letting him track, find birds, etc. Expose him to all kinds of birds (not only one species) and mammals.

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