

# Puppy Kindergarten



Puppy kindergarten can give you and your pup a great start together. People with limited dog experience benefit tremendously from well-run puppy classes, where instructors explain the mysteries of puppy behavior and teach handling skills. Unlike training classes for adult dogs, puppy classes tend to include instructions in issues such as housetraining and other management.

Perhaps you've trained a dog before and don't feel the need for help training this

one. The puppy needs the experience, even if you don't. Changes are, though, that you'll learn new things, too.

Dog trainers continue to come up with ideas that work better for more dogs. They're constantly improving on ways to teach the humans. Many dogs who would have been considered untrainable in the past are now easy to train thanks to new understanding of how to motivate them. The training equipment continues to evolve, too, and you will need instruction to use some of the tools.

Whatever dogs you've trained before, there's one guarantee: this puppy is different! Every dog is different. Even two puppies from the same litter are different from each other, will respond differently to things, and will require different handling from their humans. A good instructor has much to teach you and to help your young dog. This is an opportunity you don't want to miss.

Your puppy needs this learning environment during critical development stages. If socialization during these stages is missed, some puppies will never be as successful as they could otherwise have been at fitting into your home or whatever else you hope to do with your dog. Sadly, when a dog can't function safely with humans, it can ultimately mean a lost home and a lost life.

Good basic handling and training prevent most problems from turning into serious issues as the dog matures. We all want to enjoy our puppies and have them grow into safe dogs who spend long and happy lives in our homes. Puppy kindergarten is a great start to making this happen.

## When Is Your Puppy Ready?

Puppies mature at different rates, but classes typically try to get the pups into class prior to 6 months of age. That heads off a lot of potential behavior problems. Occasionally an older dog may be allowed in the class to overcome shyness, but only if this dog would not pose a threat to the puppies.

You need to consult your veterinarian about the best timing for your puppy to take class. This will depend on the pup's health and immune status as well as what illnesses are going around.

Discuss when to start your pup in class with the instructor, too. Ask if they've had any contagious puppies in class recently; if so, wait longer before starting. There should be careful screening of all puppies allowed in the class to make sure they will not pose undue risks to the other puppies.

In some cases you may need to just do what you can on your own in safer settings while you wait for your pup's immune status to be stronger. The instructor may have some reading suggestions for you. (See [Socializing Dogs to People](#), [Socializing Dogs to Places](#), and [Socializing Dogs to Things](#)), Keep in mind, though, that dog handling is a skill that needs to be learned. Reading is not going to be enough to learn it.

Some puppies need one or more private lessons before joining a class. Some trainers actually do all the training in private lessons, and have the classes only for dogs who are involved in their private lessons. Whatever kind of program you work with, go there without your puppy first to observe and make sure you are comfortable with how the dogs are handled.

## Goals and Benefits of Puppy Kindergarten

Several things can be accomplished through puppy kindergarten classes, especially if you keep these objectives in mind:

1. Your pup can begin a lifelong love of going to dog events and gatherings that include other well-behaved dogs.
2. A good class is an opportunity for a weekly outing with your puppy with the supervision of a skilled instructor to help you.
3. Your puppy can gain a love of learning new things that will last for life. Old dogs can indeed learn new tricks if they developed a love of learning early in life and kept it up throughout adulthood. This comes back to bless you even as the elderly dog needs to learn new skills to compensate for losing some sight, hearing and mobility. It's amazing what dogs can learn, once they know how to learn and have the confidence that they can do it.



4. You and your puppy develop a working relationship that enables you to safely take the puppy out for other social experiences and continued training.

5. A puppy who might otherwise have grown up fearful and defensive can gain confidence and overcome early problems with people and other dogs.

## Doing Class Right

Communicate with the instructor about your goals for your puppy prior to the beginning of class. This might be best done in a brief phone conversation at the instructor's convenience. The instructor will be able to help you better in class by knowing your goals. A pup being raised as a therapy dog or to live with preschool children may need different class experiences than a pup being raised for agility or Schutzhund competition. The school may have different puppy classes for different goals.

Don't overtire your puppy. Step out of the class action to the sidelines or outdoors if your puppy starts to appear tired, stressed, hot, or in need of a potty break. Don't disrupt the class, but do take good care of your puppy.

If there is a time when the puppies in class interact with each other, keep your puppy's participation in the interaction brief, and bring the puppy out of the dog-to-dog interaction on a happy note.

Don't let your puppy be picked on in class, and certainly don't let your puppy bully any of the others. Either of these situations could be detrimental to your dog's future ability to work safely and comfortably around other dogs. Puppy class is to help your dog with this, not create a problem.

If something is recommended that makes you uncomfortable, step out. Make sure you understand and are comfortable with the situation, the equipment, the method, or whatever your concern is, **BEFORE** you do it with your dog. The instructor probably knows more about dogs than you do, but there may be important aspects of your dog's personality that the instructor has not had the opportunity to notice. What is a good technique for one dog can be a bad technique for a different dog.

Don't disrupt the class, but don't let anything happen to your puppy that concerns you. The beauty of a training class is that situations can be set up for training. If you're not ready, you can learn more about it and then the situation can be recreated when you are ready to try it. If this means taking the class again, it's worth it to learn how to handle your puppy in the way that is best for the two of you.

In your regular daily practice of the class homework, keep in mind both the short attention span and physical stamina of a puppy **AND** the length of the class. A puppy can't work attentively for a solid hour. Crummy practice produces crummy training! But

the puppy needs to be able to hang out under control for the hour the class will probably last.

So how do you condition your pup for this? Put a leash on your puppy and find a good training place. You may walk there, drive there, or start in your living room. The plan is to have the puppy under basic control for an hour, with “on” and “off” times for actual training and working.

Let’s say you start by putting on the leash. This is a good opportunity to help your pup remember not to jump all over you when excited. Control starts now. Check your timer!

Next you might decide to start with a little stay practice in the living room. Or maybe you go ahead out the door with your puppy. Remember not to let your puppy dash out the door without permission!

If you’re going to do your training on a walk, keep the timer going as you walk a bit (keep that leash loose!) and stop frequently to work on a cue or two (sit, down, puppy looking to your eyes at the sound of the name, and other things you’re learning in class).

If you’re going to drive to a training location, start your timer when you actually get there. Drive time will be in addition to class time, so don’t count it as part of your practice time, either.

Carry along a favorite toy or two and some tiny treats. Besides using these things to motivate your puppy, a little play (not too wild!) is a controlled break and stress reliever for pup. At some point on your walk or at home before or after the walk, practice stays. Practice stays every day. Stays make you the leader of your dog, without ever having to battle over leadership. (See [Stay Training](#))

Spend a little time stimulating the pup with the toy for retrieving (See [Retrieving in Play](#).) For this you may want to take a longer line with you, or do it at home before or after the walk. Skip retrieving practice at any time your dog’s mouth seems uncomfortable from teething.

As your pup matures a little (around 6 months, less or more depending on the dog) start adding structure to the retrieve. Spend a few moments a day on gentle “hold it” and “give” training. Drop something now and then and let the pup hand it back to you. Your genuine praise for the pup putting a dropped object into your hand will make your dog light up.

Walk along for several steps with your full attention on the puppy and the puppy’s full attention on you. Then release the pup’s attention while you continue to walk in a more relaxed manner—but always with the leash loose, no tension on it. Work in a few sessions of “attention walking,” during your session, never too long at a time.

You'll learn more and more things to include in your hour of controlled time with your pup that is part training, part play, and 100% learning. A dog is constantly learning, either the things we want or the things we don't want.

Play is just as important to learning as all other interactions you have with your dog. Puppy kindergarten class will teach you some fun things to do with your puppy in addition to "serious" training. Remember, life is a game to your puppy. That's as it should be, because puppies, like children, learn best through play.

## Reasonable Expectations

There's good news and bad news about what your puppy learns in puppy kindergarten. The good news: your puppy will have a great foundation for all future learning and the best possible chance for a great attitude about the world and the people in it.

The bad news is that what your dog learns as a puppy is going to have to be taught again! Thought you'd take your puppy through puppy kindergarten and that would result in an obedience-trained dog? It doesn't work like that.

Puppies get their little brains turned on and turned in the right direction through early training, which provides a wonderful start. Then adolescence hits. The dog sees the world in a new way, which is fitting as maturity brings the need to take on more responsibility.

In the wild the adolescent dog would need to help the pack provide food and security. Enormous physical and mental changes occur in the adolescent dog—including the dog who is spayed or neutered—and all training has to be repeated from a new perspective.

You are now dealing with a different dog! But if you and this fascinating creature have gone through puppy kindergarten training together, you're both well-equipped to step up to an adult level of dog training. This is the point in your dog's life when REAL bonds are formed, when the dog is ready to actually choose to be your partner. It's an exciting and rewarding time.



## Before the Cuteness Wears Off

When your puppy is still little and cute, certain lessons are easily taught that would require much more work if delayed. Walking on a loose leash, paying attention when you call the name, coming when called, keeping feet on the floor to greet people, keeping teeth off humans and other essential skills for living in a human world are most easily taught to your puppy over a two or three month period in early life.

Puppy kindergarten is enormously helpful to humans and dogs, and provides about the best entertainment possible. For a small fee you get to participate in something that is mentally, emotionally, and physically healthy for you and your dog. Seeing the other puppies and sharing the experience with the other puppy-loving humans adds to the fun. Be sure to take the opportunity to do this with and for your puppy.

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*Kathy Diamond Davis is the author of the book Therapy Dogs: Training Your Dog to Reach Others. Should the training articles available here or elsewhere not be effective, contact your veterinarian. Veterinarians not specializing in behavior can eliminate medical causes of behavior problems. If no medical cause is found, your veterinarian can refer you to a colleague who specializes in behavior or a local behaviorist.*

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