

New Puppy 101

Few days are as exciting as the day you bring your new puppy home. But, before you do, here are a few things you should consider.

For the scope of this article, we'll assume you've already researched at length which breeds or mixed breeds will be compatible with your lifestyle, what constitutes a reputable, knowledgeable dog breeder (and it's not just the breeder telling you they're reputable!) and that you have read a lot about how to choose a mentally and physically healthy puppy. You already know that the pet store is the worst possible place to purchase a puppy and that pet rescues can be the greatest resources for locating your new best friend. You've also discussed your research with a high-quality veterinarian who can let you know whether you're on the right track.

Now, on to the fun part. Things you need (preferably) before you bring home that little bundle of fuzz.

1. Knowledge Base: Understand that you are bringing another living being into your home who speaks a completely different language and has a different set of instincts than you do. This little "alien" will quickly progress from toddler to teenager in the span of one year. It's up to you as the "smarter" one in the relationship to learn all you can from books, videos, behaviorists and your veterinarian about how to communicate appropriately with your new friend.

Remember, your pup is a learning sponge during that first year. She will be learning with every interaction you have. If you don't take the time to teach her the behaviors you desire, she will quickly learn things you are not terribly impressed with.

****The NUMBER ONE reason relationships between pets and people fail is due to lack of initiative and knowledge on the part of the human element within the relationship. If something's not working, it's up to you to seek knowledgeable, positive reinforcement-based help. Keep seeking help until something does work. If a training method doesn't seem to make sense or focuses on punishing negative behavior rather than shaping positive behavior, seek a new method.****

Keep learning. One dog training class just doesn't cut it. The only way your dog is going to get trained and stay trained is if you keep learning and keep training.

The best source of information is your veterinarian. Choosing a veterinary professional can be tricky, though. Just as most of us likely wouldn't choose a human physician based on "who's cheapest", neither should you choose a doctor of veterinary medicine in this fashion. You want a doctor who is able to spend time with you and your pet and who takes time to pursue continuing education. Ask your friends and family what veterinarian they go to and what things they like and dislike about that veterinary hospital. Look online. Most veterinary hospitals now have websites where you can take a virtual tour and get to know the staff before your visit. Talk to a staff member on the phone. Before you make an appointment, take a tour of the actual facility. Is it clean and up to date? Do you feel your pet will receive the highest-quality medical care available in a friendly, family-oriented environment? What is the doctor's background? Will they be able to help you with more than just medical issues? How much continuing education do the doctors and staff pursue? There is, unfortunately, a large amount of variation in the quality of veterinary medical facilities. Most poor quality facilities can be avoided by just using common sense.

2. Crate: In order to quickly teach your puppy the fine art of being housetrained and in order to save your sofa from being shredded during teething you will need a crate. Initially, your pup should only have enough room to stand up, turn around and stretch out comfortably. After your pup becomes housebroken, you can increase the amount of crate space available. Most dogs can be weaned off of crates after they are successfully housetrained, have learned some basic obedience and have finished teething. Obtain information about crate training from your veterinarian.

3. **Puppy Proofing:** As little carnivores, young pups will put absolutely everything (including shoes, electrical cords, throw pillows, garbage, toys, hair ties, etc., etc.) into their mouths. While your pup is young, make sure you pick everything up. Help your pup learn what is his by only providing 2-3 toys at a time and diverting him to his own toys whenever he tries to pick up something of yours. Learn how to train the words “Out” and “Leave It” using positive reinforcement methods. If your pup does destroy something, admit to yourself that you messed up by leaving it out and then not watching the pup closely enough. Don’t worry, you’ll do better next time.

Never, ever, ever punish a pet “after the fact”. They do not know what they are being punished for (despite that “guilty” look - which, by the way, isn’t guilt at all, just submission - i.e. the head lowered, avoiding eye contact, ears back expression that looks like they “know they did something wrong” - well, that’s your pup’s way of saying “I know you’re angry. I know you’re the boss. Please don’t hurt me”). If you catch your pet in the act, you can distract them by saying “NO” in a deep, growly tone, then divert them to one of their own toys and praise them for chewing on the appropriate object.

Most accidents (both chewing and elimination related) are due to us giving the pup too much freedom way too quickly. Keep the pup in whatever room you happen to be in using either a leash, a crate or a baby gate until training is progressing nicely. If you start giving some freedom and you backslide, remove the freedom again for a while. This isn’t a sprint, it’s a short marathon. The work you do now will pay off tremendously in the future.

4. **Toys:** Most pets love toys as much as kids do. Toys that can be chewed apart and possibly swallowed should only be used with supervision. Keep 2-3 toys out at a time. More than that can confuse a pup as they learn what they are or aren’t allowed to chew on. You may rotate those toys every 3-4 weeks with other toys.

Food or treat puzzles like the “Buster Cube” are wonderful for slowing down eating and keeping your pet occupied. A Kong toy with a small amount of peanut butter on the inside can also keep Fido occupied for a bit.

5. **Food:** A good, high-quality diet is essential. You often get what you pay for when it comes to pet food. I like to rotate the brand and type of food my pet is eating as each food has a different nutrient profile. I also occasionally supplement with cooked whole meats, whole grains, and veggies. My favorite pet food brands are Eukanuba, Wellness and Science Diet.

Please be aware that while the internet can sometimes be a source of valuable information, currently there is a tremendous amount of misinformation regarding nutrition (and, unfortunately, most other topics) for pets written by very misguided individuals. Your best source of information regarding pet foods is a veterinarian or a veterinary nutritionist. Also be cautious about receiving nutritional information from a pet store employee as this is often akin to taking human nutritional advice from the shelf stocker at Wal-Mart.

6. **Introducing Kids and Cats and Old Dogs and Puppies:** Kids and puppies typically get along quite well from day one. A couple of reminders. You are the adult. Your children will help take care of the pet, but it should never be their primary responsibility. They are children. They quickly lose interest in doing the dirty work. Don’t make the pet suffer because your child made promises they didn’t keep.

Puppies often look at children as littermates with no leadership status. It is important to set some ground rules. Children should help obedience train, feed and care for the dog. No biting of the children is allowed (even in play). Children should only pet the pup when it has “Four on the Floor” - never when jumping up. Have the children participate in obedience classes so they can learn how to communicate with the new pup. Watch their interactions closely and intervene when needed.

Cats need to be introduced more slowly. Positively reinforce your cat by giving her a treat and talking softly to her whenever she comes into the room. The pup should be kept on a leash initially and rewarded for exhibiting positive behavior around the cat. Do not allow the pup to chase the cat. Step in and remove the pup if the two are playing and the pup is getting out of hand.

Older dogs are wonderful teachers. Allow them to let the pup know when to back off. As long as they don't physically have a hold of the pup, they're just letting the little whipper-snapper know he's out of control. If the old guy is getting really crabby, remove the pup. Your more mature friend will know you've got his back and he won't have to escalate things. Give your first "baby" lots of extra love, some alone time with you and a little treat a few times a day when he sees the puppy. Make the association as positive as possible.

7. Traveling: If you are going to be traveling before your pet is fully housetrained, make certain to find someone who will take the pup and continue the housetraining in your absence. Kenneling a puppy that is not fully housetrained can set the process back quite a bit.

8. Collar and Leash: A flat, nylon or leather collar is best. It should be tight enough that it will not slip over the head, but loose enough that you can put two fingers between the collar and the neck without them feeling pinched. Remember, pups grow at a rapid rate, so remember to check the collar weekly and readjust as necessary. Training leashes should be flat nylon or leather and no longer than six feet. Chain leashes are murder on the hands and retractable leashes are useless for training though they can be nice for walking as long as your pup is trained not to pull.

9. Food Dishes: Stainless Steel or ceramic are best. Keep the bowls clean. Keep the water fresh.

10. Indoor or Outdoor: Dogs are social animals who crave attention and companionship from their families. No dog should ever have to live outside in what amounts to a life sentence of virtual solitary confinement.

10. The Rules: Decide early on, as a family, what kind of relationship you want to have with your pet. Your pup is a clean slate right now. It's up to you to teach her the rules of the household in a humane and knowledgeable manner.

You have just taken on the responsibility of caring for a thinking, feeling, living toddler of another species.

Congratulations! With just a little effort on your part, you will have a friend who will love you unconditionally for all of his or her days.