

Both Ends of the Leash

Early Education All puppy classes are not created equal

Patricia B. McConnell

Cosby the Saint Bernard was supposed to be silverware, purchased as he was as a wedding present from my aunt. She sent a generous check in response to my 1968 engagement announcement, along with advice about the best silver to buy and how to have it engraved. My fiancé and I took the check, a substantial amount to two dewy-eyed hippies right out of school, and drove to Southern California where we traded it for a 20-pound bundle of fur. We brought him home, taught him to relieve himself outside and spent our first months together in an oxytocin-induced haze, cuddling him, loving him and taking him on long walks in the desert. As instructed, we were careful not to start training him until he was seven months old.

That was standard operating procedure in the '60s and '70s, and there was little disagreement about it at the time. "House training" was one thing, but "obedience training" was another, and no responsible dog owner would begin the latter until a dog had entered adolescence. The reasons given were vague, but were always indirectly related to the fact that training methods popular at the time consisted of leash jerks and the word "NO" yelled loudly and growly when the dog did something wrong, which included not sitting when asked, the first time, with no previous instruction.

Gradually, over the years, as more positive methods gained ground—along with Ian Dunbar's "puppy kindergarten" classes—many trainers have advised guardians to start training their new dogs right away. I've been among the many. For years, I've said that you're always training your dog, whether you know it or not, because your dog is always learning from you. From my perspective, training starts the day you bring your pup home, so better to do it mindfully than inadvertently. That's a widespread argument



now, and I am but one of many thousands of trainers who have given out that advice.

Ah, but this is dog training, and when has the field ever found its professionals in complete agreement? Lately, there has been discussion in some quarters that early training and puppy classes do more harm than good. Lacking virtually any actual data on this, all we can do is speculate, but the question does raise some important issues.

As I considered various opinions regarding when to start training, I wondered if the issue wasn't primarily about how one defines the word. As is often the case in any language, one small word can mean many things to different people. However, I'm not sure that's the case here. As defined by "Webster's" (4th Edition), to train means "to coach in or accustom to a mode of behavior or performance; to make proficient with specialized instruction and practice." I suspect few would take issue with that definition, generalized as it is. I sometimes like to use the word teach (which is a synonym for "train," by the way), because it has a benevolent ring to it, even if it's more often used when conveying factual information rather than instruction on how to behave.

Thus, my first instinct—that the disagreement about when to start training is about definitions—may not have been correct. The more I think about it, the more I suspect that the controversy is less over how training is defined and more about two related issues: The methods used in training, and our expectations of the results of training.

When the method of choice was force-based, trainers argued that leash jerks and harsh verbal corrections weren't appropriate until a dog was older and "could take it." But if training consists of conditioning a puppy to come when called in exchange for treats and belly rubs, why on earth wouldn't one start the day the new dog comes home? If "disobedience" is either ignored or handled without scaring or hurting a dog, why would one wait until the dog is older? During the wait, the dog is still learning a lot, including that the environment is much more fun than you are, so why pay attention to you?

I've heard from several people that although they use positive training methods, they still wait until a dog is an adolescent to start training. However, upon further inquiry, they say that they teach their dogs to sit, lie down and come when called as puppies, but don't start what they call "serious" training until the dog is older. Ah, I think we've found the essential difference here: perhaps "serious" means a change in expectations? In other words, puppies are taught to sit and recall on cue, but they are given "puppy license" to perform erratically. Once an adolescent, on the other hand, a dog is expected to shape up and fly right. I think the issue of expectations goes to the heart of the argument, and is a key factor in evaluating the positives, or the negatives, of puppy classes.

The fact is that, like anything else, there are bad puppy classes and good puppy classes. Badly run puppy classes encourage guardians to believe the fantasy that they will transform their young dog into a perfect pet in six or eight weeks. The trainers talk on and on, oblivious to squirming puppies and frustrated guardians. They throw pups together in a "play session" melee that looks more like a riot while saying, "Don't worry, they'll work it out."

On the other hand, well-run classes teach guardians to be realistic about puppies' limited attention spans and lack of emotional control. Good classes explain what is reasonable to expect of a growing dog—including the reality that five-month-old puppies won't come when called every time, no matter how well you've trained them or how good a dog they are.

This should be intuitive; after all, we start teaching children to write in first grade, but we don't expect the Great American Novel from them when they hit second grade. However, for reasons I've never quite

understood, the public's expectations of their dogs are often that unrealistic. I've had clients call in a panic, upset that their 12-week-old Cairn Terrier isn't house-trained yet. Every dog trainer in the country can talk for hours (and sometimes does) about clients who expect perfect dogs after taking one six-week puppy class.

Good classes incorporate a minimum of lecturing from instructors, short periods of focus adapted to puppy attention spans, lots of time for pups to sniff around and investigate the environment, and carefully controlled play sessions. Good puppy classes keep the puppies busy without tiring them out and, most importantly, never allow one dog to be overwhelmed by another.

Meanwhile, the guardians learn invaluable skills that will result in happier and better-behaved dogs and fewer serious problems down the road.

The pups learn that gestures and noises made by their humans lead to wonderful things and are worth attending to. They learn that members of their own species come in all shapes and sizes, and that it can be really, really fun to play with them. And everyone learns a little bit about patience: for pups, that pausing ever so briefly before running off to play is a good thing, and for people, that their bundle of fur has a lot of maturing to do before he or she can be expected to make grown-up decisions.

What's the ratio of good puppy classes to bad ones? I have no idea. Wouldn't it be great if someone did a survey of puppy classes in different areas of the country and tracked the dogs' progress as they mature? (PhD, anyone?) I'm sure there are plenty of bad ones out there: I still hear about trainers putting shock collars on nine-week-old puppies. No, I'm not making that up; it happened in my hometown relatively recently.

I've written before about classes that throw puppies in what trainer/speaker Pia Silvani calls a "mosh pit" of out-of-control bullies who frighten the less assertive and teach them to be afraid of other dogs at an early age. Play sessions are the trickiest part of puppy classes, and in the opinion of a large number of behaviorists (including me), are the aspect of the classes that are most often poorly managed. Dogs tend to play two at a time, not in mobs, and forcing puppies together to "go play!" in large groups is

often as successful as shutting a bunch of children who don't know one another in a small room and expecting them to enjoy it.

Thus, there are no doubt puppy classes that do harm, just as there are schools and teachers that set back our children. That's no reason to toss out the concept of educating kids, just incentive to strive toward understanding and promoting what works and decreasing what doesn't. I suspect Cosby, my Saint Bernard from years ago, would agree. The class we attended was so abusive that we walked out, even though he was supposed to be "old enough to take it." (Read more about this experience in [Training Daze: Even a bad example can have a good influence](#)) But I'll bet he would have loved learning to sit for treats or a chance to play with other pups. I think of him sometimes, when discussions about puppy classes arise, and thank him again for being wise enough to walk us out of a bad class so many years ago. Here's to you Cosby; and here's to hopes that, someday, all such dog training classes will be a thing of the past.

Patricia B. McConnell, PhD, is an animal behaviorist and ethologist and an adjunct professor in Zoology at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, as well as the author of numerous books on behavior and training.

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