

## **Finding the right puppy class for you and your dog**

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Today it is widely accepted that attending a puppy class is an important part of a dog's early experience. Most classes accept puppies when they are eight to ten weeks old. This is a very trying time for most owners, especially first time dog owners. They have the equivalent of a two-year-old child with razor sharp teeth, running muck in their home without a diaper on. Oh, fun.

So, what should one look for in a puppy class? It is important to note that when a pup is between the ages of three weeks and twelve to eighteen weeks he is in a period of development known as the Socialization period. The process of socialization, which is the formation of the social attachments, occurs during this period. Social attachments to other animals and people occur very rapidly at this time. At this age, puppies will approach most unfamiliar people, locations and objects without much fear.

That said, it is important that the puppy class curriculum involve exposing the pup to a variety of novel things. These include things like: other puppies, kids, strange noises, vacuum cleaners, bicycles, skate boards, men with beards, wheel chairs and anything else the trainer can think of. More importantly, the trainer has to understand that exposure to these novel things has to be done at a pace that is comfortable to your dog. Forcing a young pup to endure an extremely scary stimulus will not do the pup any good.

Off-leash puppy play is another very important component to a good puppy class. Puppies at this age are just learning how to "talk dog". Play fighting and jaw wrestling is incredibly important. It might look like just fun, but in fact, these pups are learning when and how to inhibit their biting so as not to cause injury, and are beginning to understand each others communicative displays or signals. By interacting with each other, pups begin to learn that different behaviors have different consequences. There is nothing that can replace off leash puppy play for teaching your pup to use his mouth gently. And, anyone who has owned a puppy knows how incredibly important that lesson is.

Handling exercises are also important in a puppy class. Many classes play a "Pass the Puppy" game where pups are passed from owner to owner so that they get used to strangers. Incorporated into this game is handling the pup's feet, ears etc.

A puppy class should be a place where all of your behavioral concerns can be addressed. A good puppy class will have an orientation the first week where advice about house

training, how to handling nipping and biting, how to prevent food and object guarding and general household management is discussed.

The most important aspect of a puppy class is this: There should be NO positive punishment techniques used in the class at all. This means no spray bottles for barking, no advice given to knee the dog in the chest for jumping, no grabbing the dog's snout while yelling "No Bite" and so on. If you get even the slightest wind that these types of techniques are being used, run as fast as you can with your tail between your legs!

Hey wait, what about teaching my puppy to sit, down, shake and stay?! I would say this: It is fine if a puppy class offers the "basics" such as sit, down, come and so on. And, many six to eight week classes do. However, I would not choose a class that offers these behaviors and leaves out puppy play and socialization. You can teach your dog to lie down anytime, you can only socialize him efficiently and effectively during this brief period.