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Raising your Agility puppy



It is great for Agility to see so many puppies at shows, confirming the future of our sport. Wouldn't it be wonderful if, with this future, we didn't have reactive dogs, dogs that become over-aroused, dogs that run away from their handlers, dogs that chase other dogs? All of these behaviours should be possible to avoid with the raising of your puppy.

From the day your puppy arrives home, your preparation for Agility begins. Although actual Agility is many months away, the foundations should already be starting.

The first thing to do is play. All puppies will play naturally, and it is up to you to embrace this and strengthen your puppy's play drive. You need to be the most important thing in your puppy's life and the best way to build this relationship is through play, no excuses! Play, play, play! Long before the puppy has had its vaccinations and can leave your home, you can proof your play around your

own property. Once the puppy is playing confidently, move the play to all parts of your house and then to all parts of the garden. Play with the vacuum cleaner on, play by the tumble dryer and the lawnmower, play around your other dogs. Then take the puppy to friends' houses and play in *their* gardens.

Environmental socialisation can also start long before your puppy is fully vaccinated. Car rides every day, trips to cafes or shops, a walk down the high street, visits to school or kindy. Take your puppy to shows as soon as you can; even if puppy is not fully vaccinated, you can set up a puppy pen with a tarpaulin and newspaper so puppy doesn't go on the ground but most importantly, you can carry your puppy around the show, getting them used to the environment, meeting people of all different ages, especially children. Play with your puppy in their pen at the show. You are getting your puppy comfortable in the environment that you will later on want them to perform at their best in.

'Free shaping' behaviours is a great way to get your puppy to understand how to learn, for example: 'sit in a box'; 'down on a mat'; and 'feet on a perch'. Teach these behaviours at home first, then move them to different areas of the house and garden as you did with your play.

As soon as your puppy is vaccinated, environmental socialisation is all on. Offer a new experience every day, and play in all those environments. No matter what is going on, your puppy should play and engage with you. You can simulate exciting environments by taking the puppy to local playing fields when a football game is on or near a children's park. Keep the puppy on a longline to be safe.

Your puppy needs to play in all these situations. A supermarket car park, near high traffic areas, any noises that you can get the puppy to ignore, while playing with you, will help them to be able to cope with anything. Do not give up with play at any point and bribe with food: move further away from the distraction until you are at a point where the puppy will happily play with the toy then gradually decrease the distance.

Remember puppies have very short attention spans so keep all these play sessions short and fun.

You can then take your basic free-shaped behaviours such as sitting in a box or lying down on a mat, along with your play, to as many different situations as possible, including Agility shows. Your puppy understanding how to learn in these environments simulates the end result of asking for Agility behaviours. If you have someone to help, practice restrained recalls in all situations too.

Dog clubs are a vital part of these early months. Private trainers are awesome but cannot replicate being in a situation where dogs are running and training, often several dogs at a time in different segments/classes. There are dogs watching that are barking or playing with their owners and the situation is similar to that of a



show. Play with your puppy in this environment, do restrained recalls and ask for some basic behaviours. No matter how experienced a trainer you are, Foundation for dog sports classes at clubs are a great way to get puppies used to other breeds and types of dogs (usually many pet dogs) where you are asking for basic behaviours and lots of play in another different environment.

Playing with your puppy around the rings at shows is a great way for them to understand that the ring environment is one where they need to interact with you. While your puppy playing with other puppies is an important part of their socialisation, keep this to your gazebo, the exercise area or somewhere away from the rings. Remember, a few interactions with other puppies or really well-mannered older dogs that you know is good for your puppy but be your puppy's advocate. If a dog you don't know comes up to 'say hello' to the puppy, ask the owner politely not to since a bad experience can affect your puppy's temperament and confidence so easily.

If you see someone playing with their puppy at a show, please don't interrupt or try to speak to the puppy. Although they are just playing, they are building their relationship with their owner and interrupting this is not helpful.

It is also really important to teach your puppy just to chill out around the rings so giving them a chew or other interactive toy to help teach calmness is really good.

It is very common to see puppies lunging and barking at other dogs doing Agility, leading to a misconception that the puppy is going to love doing Agility or wants to have a go. Realistically, it means that your puppy has a very high prey drive and wants to chase the fast moving thing in the ring, whether it's the dog or the handler! Allowing your puppy to continue to do this will be the first step towards having an older dog who either chases other dogs or cannot concentrate and work in a high-drive environment.

Move away from the ring, engage with your puppy/young dog,

instigate play and only go as close to the ring as they can continue to concentrate on and play with you. This will need to be built up over a period of time and definitely worked on at your dog training club.

If you have a young dog who is already over-aroused at shows then there are several calming techniques that can be used, teaching the dog a 'food follow' so they can be rewarded for giving you attention closer to the ring, and rewarding calmness, then moving further away to play.

For those of us who already attend shows regularly it is sometimes easier to leave a new puppy at home with a partner or family member. This does not help the puppy get used to the environment you later want it to compete in and wastes vital time that could be spent engaging with your puppy in between your other dogs' Agility runs and building that relationship. Agility shows are so important in your puppy's environmental socialisation.

For people new to the sport, keep an eye out for shows in your area (even Conformation or Obedience shows) and get your puppy along to immerse them in the show experience.

Remember, although the age your dog is old enough to compete is 18 months, some dogs won't be ready until much older than this. For clubs teaching new Agility handlers (and experienced handlers too), don't encourage people to compete with their young dogs until they are able to get focus and engagement from their dogs in any situation. Make sure they can perform different behaviours around the ring while other dogs are competing, both at club training and at shows. If they can't, take a step back and work with them. There is no rush!

Training and competing with a well-mannered dog who is fully engaged with its owner makes Agility so much more fun for both you and everyone else. If we raise our puppies better and all work together, we can achieve this. 🐾

Sallie Remon

