

# Doing it right, right from the start

by Dr. Pamela J. Reid

Ten stupid ways people mess up their dogs.

Raising a puppy strikes me as being a lot like bringing up a child—a good parent provides the child with a solid foundation of education and experience. The ideal child is friendly, respectful of others, displays appropriate social behaviour and good manners, and has sufficient intelligence and knowledge to survive in the world. Most of us want the same virtues in our dogs but we have such a short time frame for instilling these in a puppy that is going to develop into an adult in a few months.

Many behavioural problems can be prevented by doing things right from the start. If only every puppy could arrive at

its new home, complete with a 'how-to' manual and a private tutor to ensure the job is accomplished properly! So in the tradition of Dr. Laura Schlesinger and her *Ten Stupid Things People Do* books, here's my list of pet peeves.

## 1. The owner fails to provide sufficient socialization with people.

You'd think walking a cute puppy around the neighbourhood would work like a magnet and attract zillions of people. Owners tell me they discourage their puppies from interacting with people because the puppy still jumps up and the owner

doesn't want to deal with the embarrassment of apologizing to complete strangers. I also see owners pulling the puppy away because he is trying to make contact with an unreceptive person. In both cases, the puppy learns that it's not very reinforcing to say hello to strangers and the owner may unintentionally teach the puppy to dislike or distrust unfamiliar people. If your puppy loves people and wants to socialize, promote it! Allow him to greet people. (Teach him to sit for greetings, of course.) And when you encounter people who don't want to say hello to our pup, it is best to distract the puppy with treats and get his attention on you rather than dragging and pulling him away from the target of his affections.

## 2. The owner fails to provide sufficient socialization with dogs.

The majority of puppies start out life enjoying the company of other dogs. After all, they've just spent several months whooping it up with their littermates. Now in their new home, every time they see a dog and try to approach, the owner pulls in the other direction. As with people, you want to encourage your puppy's sociable nature and never, ever punish or frustrate your puppy by pulling him away from other dogs. Draw a puppy's attention away with treats or toys if he wants to approach an unfriendly dog.

## 3. The owner fails to take advantage of opportunities for learning.

Puppies are little learning machines, soaking up information about how the world works. They learn some things, such as bite



*Socialize with people and children*

PHOTO: SHELLEY WORK

inhibition, coming when called and elimination on command, more easily as puppies than as adults. Young puppies even have a following response – in a new environment, they will follow you wherever you go. Take advantage of this built-in tendency and teach the puppy to follow your lead. Make frequent trips to new areas (safe areas where he can be off leash) so he will be less confident. Walk

away from him – he'll follow. Reward him with goodies when he does. The problem with leash training a puppy is that a leash teaches him that no matter where he goes, the owner is always about six feet behind.

**4. The owner fails to provide for the dog's natural behaviours.**

Owners need to recognize that the puppy

is a dog, not a furry human baby. Dogs are different from people, and they like to do different things. They like to explore the world with their mouths and, when they're not sleeping, they like to play all the time. Most puppies like to play tug, they shred things and they like to be chased. By all means, teach them how to play these games; however, they should be taught what is and isn't appropriate. Instead of allowing the puppy to play tug with your trousers, redirect him to a tug toy. Instead of allowing the puppy to shred your shoes, redirect him to his own second-hand stuffed toys. Instead of allowing the puppy to always run away from you in play, teach him to enjoy both being chased and chasing so he can learn to come when called.

**5. The owner fails to bond with the puppy through play.**

In my puppy classes, I used to include a competition to see which owner, without using toys or food, could get their puppy wag his tail the hardest. I switched tactics when I discovered that many owners have no idea how to play with their puppies.

Wonderful relationships develop between puppies and owners who share playtime. Play is how puppies learn and it should be a special activity that you share together.

**6. The owner fails to handle or touch the puppy sufficiently.**

Puppies need to learn to like being handled, touched, groomed and restrained. This is not something that comes naturally to all puppies. For instance, a puppy should be taught to enjoy being held on his back to have his tummy rubbed and his feet tickled. Eventually, you will be able to use this position to clip his nails. Massage the puppy all over his body. You want him to learn that human hands are good. Regular touch is also an excellent way to monitor a puppy's health as well.



PHOTO: JENNIFER PITE



*Provide toys for busy mouths*

**7. The owner encourages food guarding through benign neglect.**

It is shocking how often I hear the mistaken belief that you shouldn't bother a dog while he is eating because he is supposed to guard his food bowl. Nonsense! Become intimately involved in your puppy's mealtime. Sit and talk with him, stroke him and feed him his kibble by hand. Teach him to enjoy having you sit with him while he eats by giving him goodies from a stash of very special treats that are far better than what he has in his bowl. You should also make the same effort whenever the puppy has a chew bone: hold it for him so it is easier to chew, and give him special treats when you approach him while he is chewing. If he has a Kong stuffed with food, show him how talented you are because you can get the stuffing out with your fingers and give it to him.

**8. The owner fails to use the right balance of discipline.**

I see many owners who are too hard with

their puppies. The owner expects the pup to behave like an adult dog and because this is not possible, ends up punishing the puppy frequently. On the other hand, I also see owners who are too lenient with their puppies. The puppy has no opportunity to learn boundaries to his behaviour. A puppy needs fair and consistent rules. To paraphrase Dr. Laura and her approach to child-rearing: "A good parent provides the child with lots of love, security, respect, awe, and just a little touch of fear." While it is important for a puppy to learn that discipline will happen for really serious transgressions, it is imperative that the owner ensures that the puppy knows what is expected of him before discipline ever enters the picture.

**9. The owner fails to provide the puppy with sufficient exercise.**

Most puppies don't get sufficient exercise. Neither do most adult dogs for that matter. We selected our various breeds to perform a variety of jobs for us, almost all of which require strenuous work. Now we

force our dogs to live in high-rise apartments and exercise by walking around a city block. Many behaviour problems can be prevented or diminished simply by providing your dog with adequate exercise. Puppies require plenty of exercise but it needs to be on their own terms. They must be able to flop down and rest when necessary because they are still developing physically.

**10. The owner provides the puppy with too much free food.**

Owners who provide their puppies with easy access to an abundance of food are giving away a valuable tool for establishing the bond between owner and puppy. The puppy should view the owner as a food-vending machine. Most puppies find exercise every bit as reinforcing as food, if not more. Get outside, even in the dead of winter, and take your cookies or kibble along so that every time your pup looks at you, give him a treat. You will both be healthier and happier for it. ♦



*Provide plenty of exercise*