



Puppy Raising

Foundation knowledge:

Understanding your puppy

Version 1.1

Updated November 2024

Sections

There are 4 topics within this document. By following each link below you will be directed straight to that area of guidance.

- 1. Knowing your puppy**
- 2. Managing for success**
- 3. Teaching foundations**
- 4. Being a partnership**



Overview

Ideally, you've already read the 'Our four principles' guidance which introduces our puppy raising programme.

This Foundation knowledge guidance provides background information to the principles and will develop your understanding of how to apply them when raising your guide dog puppy.

As a reminder, the principles are:

Summary of updates to version 1.1

Aligned with Puppy Raising guidance review. Content remains the same.



Knowing your puppy



Teaching foundations



Managing for success



Being a partnership

Alongside this guidance, we have also created a 'Foundation knowledge: Visual impairment' guidance. Reading both will give you a deeper understanding of both our dogs and the people we support.



Understanding dogs

Knowing about the effects that genetics and the environment have on the behaviour and physical development of your puppy will help you support and understand them during your time together.

Genetics versus environment

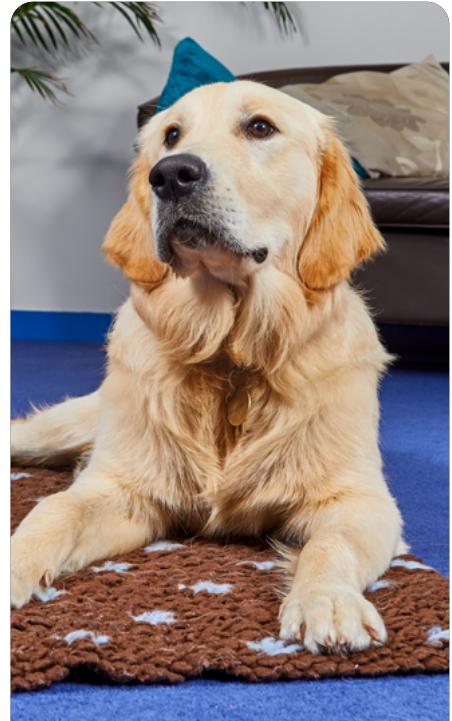
Guide dog puppies, just like any other dog, are not blank pages when they're born. They're all individuals with different personalities. Puppies are a mix of their parents' genetics, and all the experiences of their early lives.

Every puppy will have genetic tendencies that can get switched on or off depending on the experiences they go through as they mature. While it's not possible to change underlying personality traits, during puppyhood we can alter the way they are expressed and how this affects your puppy's behaviour.

The effect of breed on behaviour

Your puppy's breed predicts what they'll look like as an adult. It may also suggest certain behavioural tendencies which may or may not be switched on as they grow up, but it cannot directly predict their temperament. A fearful mum of any breed is more likely to produce fearful puppies. This is because the puppies don't just inherit her genetic makeup - they also experience and learn from her behaviour while in the litter. We therefore only breed from dogs who have sound temperaments and physical attributes.

Some dog breeds have been selectively bred for specific jobs, so certain behaviours are more likely. However, there are many collies who do not have any stalk or herding instinct and greyhounds with no chase or predatory instincts.



A golden retriever puppy sitting on a rug.

There's a degree of 'confirmation bias' generated by us as humans which comes into play during puppy development. Where we believe that a specific breed will show a characteristic, we're primed to notice it or behave in certain ways. This then influences how this behaviour develops over time, resulting in us shaping the behaviour we expect to see.

As an example, we may indulge a retriever puppy when picking up shoes and carrying them around the house. They're demonstrating their desire to retrieve and hold items in their mouths, and we tend to be pleased with that. If a Staffordshire bull terrier puppy shows the same behaviour, we may be more likely to remove the slipper and prevent any further shoe-stealing incidents for fear of chewing. In these examples, the retriever grows up to carry things, but we remove the bull terrier's opportunities to learn the same behaviour. The prediction that the retriever wants to hold things in their mouth because they are a retrieving breed comes true.

With all puppy behaviour, focus on what you want your puppy to learn, rather than on what their breed may or may not predict they'll do. When talking about a puppy's behaviour, it's more accurate to say what a puppy is doing in a given context, rather than trying to interpret any traits. For example, instead of saying 'he's being a goldie', 'she's so shepherdly' or 'it's what labs do', describe the behaviour you see, for example 'when I ask my puppy to get in the car; they continue to stand and look at me, but don't move'; or 'when my puppy sees new things, they spend a lot of time looking in that direction and may bark and pull towards it'.

This gives us more useful information from a training perspective. It also helps avoid the use of labels associated with breed or traits which are less informative for discussing behaviour.



A puppy being trained on a set of stairs.

Your puppy's development

From birth

From birth to approximately two weeks old, your puppy was sensitive to touch, taste and smell but their eyes were closed, and they had limited hearing. During this period, they spent most of their time sleeping or eating, and were only able to crawl slowly to move around.

They couldn't regulate their own temperature and their siblings likely slept on top of each other for warmth. They received very gentle handling and exposure to important scents such as people and other animals. Although tiny, they were already starting to learn about the world around them.

The timings below are approximate estimates of your puppy's development, however, as we have already discussed every puppy is an individual.

From two weeks old

Exact timing varies between breeds, but this is generally when your puppy would have opened their eyes and ears and started to distinguish between light and sound. They started to show social behaviour towards their litter mates, were more mobile, and started to support their own body weight.

At this point their breeding dog holder will have introduced background sounds to provide the litter with a safe and gentle first exposure to key noises in the home. This might have included recordings of sounds like hoovers, fireworks and traffic, which are normally played on a very low sound setting. This could help avoid the development of fear or anxiety towards these noises in later life by building positive emotional connections.

Once mobile

From around three weeks, or once fully mobile, your puppy became primed to explore and seek out new things with little or no fear. Their primary focus was becoming more familiar with the wider world and developing their social skills. Your puppy will have also developed their first set of teeth during this period and will then have been weaned onto an appropriate diet.

From eight weeks old

At this age, your puppy will have left their first home and started their wider world socialisation. They will need to toilet and eat frequently. Their bladder and stomach are still very small, and it's likely that they'll wake at least once during the night to toilet. They will sleep for around 18 - 20 hours a day.

This is a sensitive time in your puppy's development and so it's essential to ensure their experiences are positive and fun. Any negative encounters during this period can have a lasting effect, and often we don't know puppies have entered the fear period until it's too late. Careful management and managed exposure can minimise the impact of the fear period. It's best to focus on the quality of positive experiences over quantity.

Juvenile phase

At this time puppies may experience a second socialisation period where they're particularly sensitive to bad experiences. They may be unsure at something they've previously walked past, or bark at a stranger on the street. In the moment, stay cheerful and don't make a big deal out of it. Let them look and investigate if possible so they can reassure themselves it's nothing to worry about.

Be aware over the next few weeks that this might happen again, be mindful of upcoming interactions, and err on the side of caution if necessary. Try avoiding situations that may worry your puppy and set up lots of positive experiences using food, toys and play. If you need extra support, please contact your Puppy Development Advisor (PDA).

From six months old

Physically, your puppy's bones and muscles will develop and they will grow to their adult height and weight between 6 to 18 months depending on their breed.



An 8 week old puppy off lead in the garden.

Lean puppies are less likely to develop joint conditions, so it's important to watch feeding amounts and adjust accordingly if your puppy begins to gain excess weight. Use the Guide Dogs Body Condition Score Chart to help guide you on your puppy's weight. Equally, you need to monitor the amount of exercise your puppy does while they're growing to avoid later joint and bone problems.

By eight months, your puppy's adult teeth should be fully visible. Check your puppy's mouth for any irregular tooth growth. If you notice any retained puppy teeth alongside their new adult teeth, please let us know.

Adolescent phase

The transition between juvenile and adolescent is blurred, varying between breeds and individuals and is often a gradual process. Generally, this stage happens anywhere between six months and two years. During this time, your puppy will undergo physical, hormonal, emotional and mental changes. Their behaviour may change from day to day. Assess their behaviour regularly to make sure they're not becoming overwhelmed.

In this phase, it's common to feel like your previously well-trained puppy has forgotten everything they've ever learnt. They're much more likely to ignore a recall, and may become more noisy, boisterous or energetic. They may also ignore a cue from you, their main carer, and be more responsive to other people.

Their brain is effectively being re-wired. Your puppy needs your help to support them through this phase. Review and be prepared to reduce your expectations of what your puppy can do. Adolescent dogs can be more prone to taking risks so your puppy might start to get into scuffles with other dogs. Careful management will help them maintain a secure bond with you and keep them safe.

As with all their phases of development, the key is to support your puppy and provide plenty of opportunities for them to get it right and be reinforced for doing so, while avoiding them practising unwanted behaviours.

Understanding what makes dogs, dogs

Physical health, emotional and mental wellbeing

The opportunity to show natural dog behaviours is an important part of your puppy's welfare. Historically, we've thought about animal welfare in terms of preventing negative experiences, such as hunger, cold or ill health. Current thinking promotes the idea of positive welfare, aiming for dogs who are happier and more able to develop their full potential and live fulfilling, enriched lives.

Positive experiences include feelings of safety, reward, curiosity, playfulness, goal- directed engagement, calmness, contentment and affection. The aim of your partnership is to maximise these feelings for both you and your puppy.

Dogs have emotions

Dogs can experience a range of emotions, but there's currently no evidence to suggest they feel or express the full range of human emotions that we feel (e.g. it's unlikely that dogs can feel guilt). It's important that you think about your puppy's emotional wellbeing throughout your partnership, however, it's equally important not to attribute more complex human emotions or motivations to your puppy.

Often, they're incapable of feeling or behaving in the way that you might believe they are. Keep in mind that dogs do what works, so if your puppy is repeating a behaviour you don't like, there is something in that behaviour that works for them. Try to find out what this is and think about how you can prevent them from continuing to practise it.



A puppy raiser gives their puppy a new toy.

Working together as partners

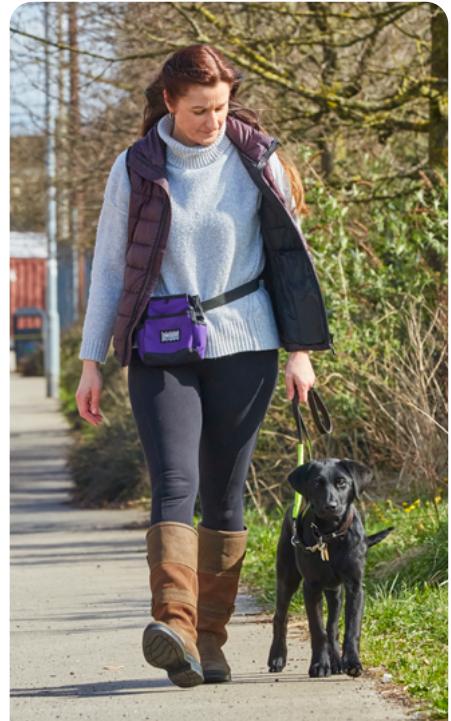
Back in the 1970's David Mech studied a captive group of wolves and it's from this work that the idea of dominance as a key factor in dog behaviour arose. Since then, further evaluation and research has consistently shown that wolves live as complex family units that work co-operatively rather than being ruled by one 'dominant' lead wolf. Attempts to 'dominate' or 'rule' the group are rare, if they exist at all.

Labels like 'dominant' or 'dominance' don't reflect the realities of how we live with our dogs. Dominance is a human construct which has often been misunderstood and misused in the dog training context. Unfortunately, this has caused a great deal of harm by leading many people to assume they need to 'dominate' their dogs. This has led to inappropriate training or treatment of dogs.

Dogs are not motivated by social status. As humans, it's our job to make it enjoyable for our puppies to perform desirable behaviours, so they want to do as we ask, not to force them to comply. We're not 'backing down' by respecting the puppy's wishes. And in respecting their wishes, we will maintain their trust. In the long term, by working together we will have a dog that is easier to live with and more likely to behave as we want.

Dogs do what works

Dogs do what works for them. They do things that are enjoyable, rewarding and result in a suitable pay off. For example, a dog who wants to sleep on the back of the sofa is not doing so to elevate themselves above you in the pack; they're doing it because they find it reinforcing – it's warm, comfortable, gives them access to look out of the window, and allows them to be close to you.



A puppy raiser and puppy taking a walk.

Your puppy may be highly sociable and happy to do anything for the opportunity to interact with you. Another puppy may not be so interested in people but be highly motivated by food or toys. Some puppies are quite independent and will require more input before they want to interact, while others will naturally want to include you in everything they do.

Discovering what motivates your puppy is the key to successfully raising a puppy. You can use that motivating factor to reinforce the behaviours you want. These individual differences are what define each puppy's personality and temperament. Remember, there's likely to be a wide variation in a litter, as well as across and between breeds.

What makes a dog, a dog

As a dog, your puppy behaves in ways that you won't necessarily understand as a human. Most significantly, their sense of smell is much more important to them than ours is to us, and they can benefit enormously from opportunities to use and explore with their nose. By giving your puppy opportunities to sniff on a regular basis, and especially when they're unsure or in a new place, you're helping them to learn faster and gain confidence.

Other natural dog behaviours include the desire to dig (which is best channelled to a specific digging pit rather than being suppressed) and the use of barking or growling in communication.



A puppy sniffing the grass on a field.

Dog body language and communication

Visual communication is key

Communication between dogs takes many forms: auditory, visual, chemical and tactile. Dogs primarily use their body language to communicate how they're feeling. Much of what they signal, may not be intentional but rather a reflection of their internal state, similar to the way we might unconsciously touch our hair or face when nervous. Understanding what your puppy is saying can guide the way you interact and respond to certain situations. It can also help you to read the intentions of other dogs before letting your puppy interact.

You will often see body language combined with audible communication, such as growls, whines or barks. These are all key ways in which dogs communicate with each other and with us, letting us know how they're feeling and what their intentions are.

Dogs are also able to communicate with each other using pheromones. This form of communication is invisible to humans, but we know it's an important part of dialogue between dogs.

Avoiding confrontation

Dogs are social animals, and like any social animal, they try to avoid confrontation and use body language and other communication signals to diffuse conflict as much as possible. In fact, very few dogs choose overt aggression as a first response. It's just too much of a risk to their own health and wellbeing. The expressive nature of dogs' faces and bodies give us an opportunity to recognise what they're saying and to respond appropriately.



A puppy pulling at the lead.

The whole picture

When observing and interpreting body language it's important to remember that you're unlikely to see a single individual signal that will give you a comprehensive understanding of how your puppy is feeling and the messages they are trying to convey. You need to consider the context of the situation and your puppy's entire body, from nose to tail. A wagging tail is not necessarily a happy puppy. Stiff, high tail wags mean something very different from low, slow wags, or a helicopter tail.

Dogs, even your young puppy, are experts in observation and will see more in another dog's behaviour than you will. As with all things, practise makes perfect and the more often you observe dogs, the more you can see what is happening quickly. Always observe the signals in front of you before trying to interpret what they may mean.

Low level signals

Many indicators of stress are very subtle. They include:

- Yawning
- Slow blinking
- Actively avoiding (like it's not there)
- Nose or lip licking

Of course, any of these could be present for positive reasons , such as when your puppy has just woken up, just finished a treat, or sniffed something which has left a residue on their nose. Context is key. If you see these signals in a situation where stress could be the cause, stop whatever you're doing with your puppy or change the situation to make the experience easier for them.



A puppy jumping up at their puppy raiser.

Other early signs of discomfort include:

- Your puppy turning their head or body away
- Walking away (if possible)
- Sitting down and pawing
- Having their ears flat and/or back (this will vary with breed, but even the most upward pointing ears can be drawn back when a puppy is worried)
- A tucked tail
- Crouching or creeping body
- Lying on their back with a leg raised*

*It's easy to confuse this latter position with your puppy asking for a tummy rub. It can be if legs are stretched out flat, but if a leg is raised this may be a request from them to be left alone. They're telling you that what just happened was becoming stressful for them and they're asking you, or another dog, to back off.

Increasing discomfort

Puppies do not necessarily show all the signals mentioned, or in a specific order. However, the quicker you can identify some of the early signs of discomfort and act the better. Some puppies will choose to stand stiffly, staring at the source which is making them feel uncomfortable. If you see this behaviour in your own puppy, check how their weight is positioned. Is it equal across all four paws, or are they shifting their weight backwards or forwards? This can give you a clue as to their next move and help you interrupt their behaviour before things escalate.

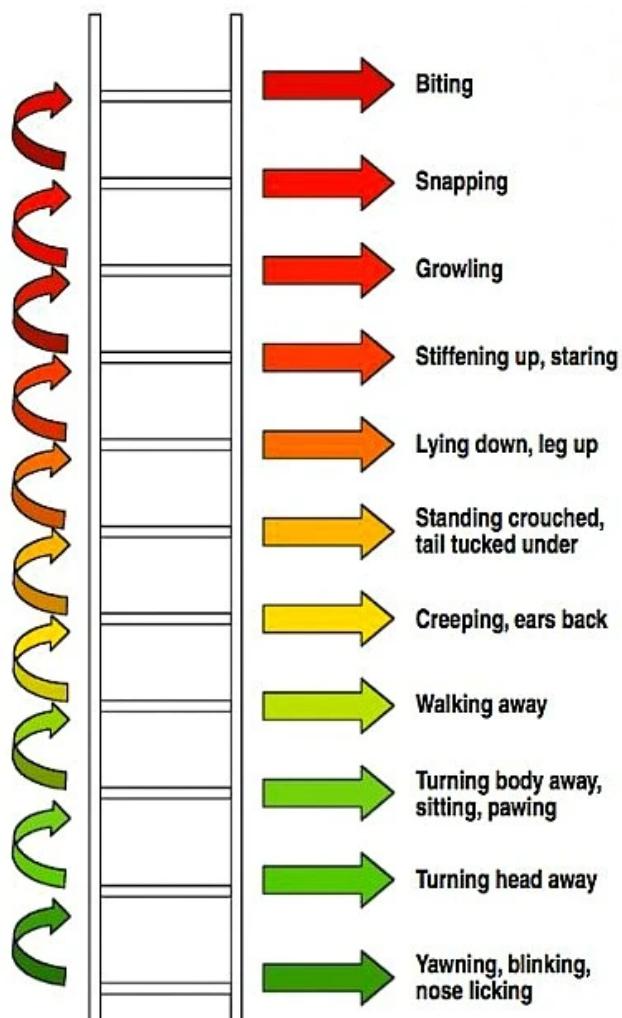
If you can see your puppy's eyes, check whether they're soft and relaxed or if there's visible tension across the forehead, are their eyes narrowed or pupils dilated? Seeing the whites of your puppy's eyes can also be a sign of stress because they are choosing to turn their head away but keeping their eyes on whatever is worrying them. Remember to look at the rest of their body to see what other signs they might be showing you.



A puppy investigates a pan lid in the floor.

The ladder of aggression

[Available from this website](#)



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BSAVA Manual of Canine and Feline Behavioural Medicine, 2nd edition

The 'Ladder of Aggression' was developed by Kendal Shepherd and published in the BSAVA manual. The Ladder of Aggression shows a range of behaviours that a dog can display and how they escalate, from subtle signs through to overt aggression.

Dogs won't always show behaviours at each 'rung'. It's common for behaviours to jump three or four stages as they escalate (for instance, from nose licking to standing crouched). Different dogs will start at different points on the ladder and some may show more overt signs as their first indicator of discomfort.

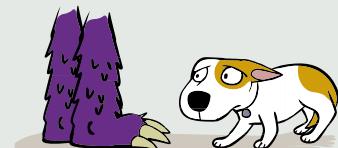
Body language of fear in dogs

[Available here](#)

Body Language of Fear in Dogs



Slight Cowering



Major Cowering

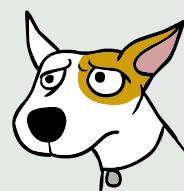
More Subtle Signs of Fear & Anxiety



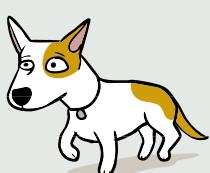
Licking Lips
when no food nearby



Panting
when not hot or thirsty



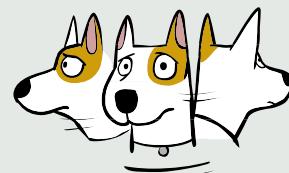
Brows Furrowed, Ears to Side



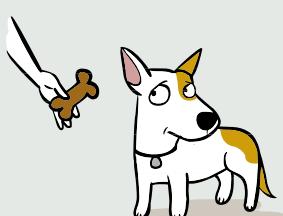
Moving in Slow Motion
walking slow on floor



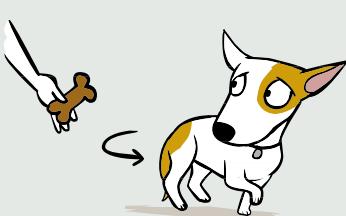
Acting Sleepy or Yawning
when they shouldn't be tired



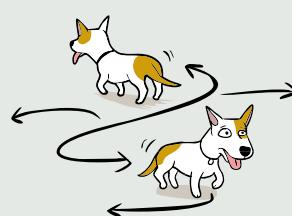
Hypervigilant
looking in many directions



Suddenly Won't Eat
but was hungry earlier



Moving Away



Pacing

For additional Low Stress Handling information, posters, flyers, books, and DVDs, please visit our website at <http://DrSophiaYin.com>



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Displacement activities

Your puppy may perform displacement behaviours in situations where they feel overwhelmed. Displacement behaviours can help your puppy feel better or avoid a situation by channelling their energy into something else. Typical displacement behaviours include sniffing the ground, scratching themselves, grabbing or gulping food, and shaking. It's easy to take displacement behaviours at face value, but it's important to consider scenarios as a whole to understand if the behaviour you're seeing could actually be a sign of stress.

Shake it off

You'll often find that a puppy or dog does a large shake after a stressful experience. It's a bit like us breathing a sigh of relief. If you notice this behaviour, it's worth making a note of what happened immediately beforehand and planning how to improve how your puppy feels about it. Car travel, restraint, interactions with other dogs, equipment fitting, and other encounters are common triggers for the post-experience shake off.



Both dogs pictured are showing signs of being uncomfortable about this interaction. Pet dog has their head slightly turned and paw lifted. The labrador has their hackles slightly raised and the whites of their eyes visible.

Audible signals

Dogs give audible signals such as growling and barking. These can be warnings that your puppy is feeling uncomfortable and wants to push a threat away.

There are occasions when growling is playful (you'll often see this during play with other dogs, or with a toy). A bark can be a greeting and a signal that your puppy wants to approach something rather than avoid it. It's important to consider the situation holistically. To interpret what you're seeing accurately, you need to be aware of what's going on around your puppy and recognise when they need a bit more support or management.

Excitement vs anxiety

It can be very easy to interpret anxiety as excitement in some puppies. Over excitement, particularly if it involves mouthing or grabbing at hands or the lead, can be a sign of anxiety. Your puppy may be masking their concern at greeting someone with an exaggerated display of confidence including licking, jumping up, or mouthing. Similarly, raised hackles are not an aggressive response, but a sign that your puppy is emotionally aroused in some way.



Labrador puppy has their hackles slightly raised and is sniffing the ground after an interaction with another dog.



Managing for success

Self-reinforcing behaviours

Some behaviours are inherently self-reinforcing (i.e. they give your dog a sense of reward just by doing them). Puppies bark, or chase things because it feels good.

Chewing and digging are similarly self-reinforcing. Any behaviour which is intrinsic to being a dog is likely to be self-reinforcing in this way. These are the behaviours which are most important for you to manage.

Preventing and managing these behaviours is needed to make sure your puppy does not discover just how much fun they can be. For example, to prevent unwanted chewing, provide appropriate toys and chews for your puppy (refer to 'Toys and food rewards' in 'Preparing for your puppy'). When it comes to barking, avoiding situations which trigger barking will be more successful than trying to reduce barking once it has become a habit (e.g. barking for attention).

Another example is chasing. Whilst you're proofing your puppy's recall, avoid letting your puppy off lead in areas where it's possible they will encounter wildlife or other animals they can chase. Once they've learned how enjoyable chasing is, it can be much harder to teach them an alternative.

Subtle signs

It's important you don't punish your puppy for showing visual or verbal signs of discomfort in any situation. If you pay attention and respond to lower-level signals such as lip licking, freezing or your puppy turning their head away, they won't feel the need to escalate to snapping or biting. If you ignore or punish the early signs of discomfort, some puppies will stop offering these warnings and use more overt aggression without warning.

We can compare puppy brains to the early stages of a climbing plant, with each branch or stem representing a neural connection between different parts of the brain. When they're young, your puppy is making lots of these pathways as part of their learning and development, just as the plant sends out lots of shoots as it establishes itself. As your puppy ages, the well-practised pathways become thicker and strengthen, while the less-used pathways wither and fade.

We train and trim the plant so that we keep the stems we want and encourage it to bloom. The aim of raising puppies is to develop the pathways and foundations we want, and let the undesirable ones die off through lack of attention and practise. This is why preventing your puppy from behaving in undesired ways is so important. Gently guide and direct your puppy away from practising unwanted behaviour and focus on reinforcing the behaviours you do want.

Dog-dog interactions

When your puppy is greeting another dog, always monitor both dogs in the encounter. Again, look for subtle signs of discomfort in both dogs (for instance, turning their heads away or licking their lips). Ending the encounter if you see these subtle signals, will help prevent either dog escalating to growling or snapping.

If your puppy shows signs of discomfort around another dog (tucked tail, crouching body, lip licks etc), intervene to give them space. Separately, build your puppy's confidence around other dogs with controlled interactions with calm adult dogs, or by allowing them to simply observe and approach if they're comfortable to do so.

Not having what they want, when they want it

Your puppy could show apparently aggressive behaviour when they're unable to do what they want. This might be when they're on a lead, behind a barrier, when, you're refusing to engage with them, or when they want to interact with another dog. They may bark and lunge, or grab at the lead or you, because they can't get to the thing they want.

This type of behaviour is often seen when puppies become adolescents and have been encouraged or allowed to play with every dog they've met as a young puppy. As they grow up, there are new expectations to walk past or ignore other dogs. These new restrictions can be very frustrating.

Your puppy is not fearful, nor are they trying to increase distance between them and the source of their frustration. They may have erect or forward-facing ears, body weight forward, a high tail or raised hackles, or bark continuously.

This type of behaviour initially comes from a positive place – your puppy wants to interact with the subject of their frustration. However, frustration is a negative emotion and frequently experiencing it can lead to negative associations with the cause of the frustration.

In these scenarios, remove your puppy from the situation to a distance where they can calm down. You can then reinforce any calm behaviour.

Once you have identified what caused the frustration and understood the distance your puppy can calmly manage, you can begin working on slowly decreasing the distance you are from it or increasing the intensity of the interaction. It's best to avoid putting your puppy in situations that you know will frustrate them. If in doubt seek help from your Puppy Development Advisor on how best to manage your puppy's frustration.

Being able to tolerate situations where they can't get what they want, is something a lot of puppies struggle with. Many factors affect how your puppy will deal with frustration, but in general they will manage this better as they mature. Some puppies, however, may need additional help from you to develop their self-control 'muscles'. Your training will give your puppy what they need to manage themselves as an adult.



Teaching foundations

How dogs learn

Dogs learn by association

This means they learn to predict certain outcomes by associating certain things (e.g. words or a context) with a response. For example, a lead means going for a walk. A human picking up a food bowl means that it's dinner time. The doorbell means a person may be about to come into the house. You can use this style of learning to teach the behaviours you want.

Take the example of wanting to teach your puppy to keep their paws on the floor while greeting people:

As the person approaches, reward your puppy low to the ground. Your puppy will learn that an approaching person means good stuff happens.

Much of what you teach your puppy in the early stages relies on this kind of associative learning. You can apply this technique with your puppy to many situations.

Learning through consequences

Your puppy also learns through the consequences of their behaviour. Following on from the example:

- Association (as before): As the person approaches, reward your puppy low to the ground. Your puppy learns an approaching person means good stuff happens low to the ground.
- Consequence: It's worth them keeping their paws on the floor and their nose down.
- Keep rewarding your puppy throughout the greeting so they learn to keep their paws on the floor for the duration of the encounter.



B

A = B

Learning by association

In this example, your puppy learns that when people approach, rewards magically appear close to the ground. They also learn that keeping their paws on the floor results in more rewards from you. This will reinforce (strengthen) the behaviour of keeping all four paws on the floor.

Over time you'll reduce the frequency and level of reward, so your puppy learns to manage their excitement when someone greets them. In this scenario, your puppy has never practised jumping up at people and the desire to do so will fade. Instead, your puppy has practised keeping their paws on the floor when people approach and strengthened the neural pathway that controls this behaviour (we'll cover this in more detail in practical advice sessions).

Likewise, if you reward your puppy for being on your left side, they will repeat the behaviour because being there pays off. You can use this to help teach your puppy to walk on a relaxed lead before you even attach the lead, by making the left-hand side a reinforcing place to be.

Reinforcement

In training terms, when we talk about reinforcement, we mean a consequence which works to strengthen and increase behaviour over time. The timing of the reinforcing consequence is very important. Your puppy makes an association between what is happening in that moment and the reward itself.

For example, if you decide to give your puppy a food reward for sitting when asked, your puppy needs to be rewarded quickly once their bottom touches for maximum reinforcement value. Ideally whilst they are still sitting. If your puppy sits and then stands up before being rewarded, you are reinforcing standing up, not sitting.



Increase behaviour

Imagine you're walking your puppy on the lead and your puppy starts to pull towards something. If you call them back to your side, and immediately reward them for being in the correct place, what behaviour have you reinforced?

It's easy to think that you're rewarding your puppy for walking with you but you're actually teaching them to pull out and then come back to you where they are then rewarded. Reinforcement needs to happen while the behaviour you like is occurring, not once it has finished.

Ladder of rewards

It's important to highlight that it's your puppy who decides what is reinforcing, not you. You can try to offer your puppy a piece of their normal food as a reward, but if your puppy does not value the food, it will not strengthen future behaviour. Your puppy may not even eat the food reward in this situation.

What your puppy may find rewarding in one situation, may not work in another. They might switch preferences depending on the current situation. Think about your own life and how you react to rewards. Your employer could reward you with a day off. However, if you've just taken two weeks off, you may have found a bonus more rewarding particularly if you have bills to pay. So, while you did get a reward, it didn't have the impact your employer had hoped for.

Your puppy will decide if the behaviour was worth the pay off. You'll only know if the reward was sufficiently reinforcing if the behaviour is repeated or offered again, or if your puppy maintains their engagement with you in the hope that the chance to earn that reward will be repeated.

If your puppy appears reluctant to repeat a behaviour, it's likely that the reward you offered simply wasn't reinforcing enough in that situation. You may need to consider increasing the value of your rewards, switching the type of reward you're using or managing for success by making the situation easier for your puppy (or both). You may need to use a combination of methods.

Anything which increases the likelihood of a behaviour happening again is reinforcing – this can be food, toys, play, praise, fuss, or access to something your puppy wants (e.g. the garden, time off the lead, a person, or a sniff). Different rewards will have different levels of reinforcement.

A piece of their food may be less valuable as a reinforcer than a moist dog treat, or a chance to say hello to another dog.

Using food to help your puppy learn

We often use food to teach and manage behaviour. Food has many benefits as a reinforcer. It's easy to carry in your pocket or in a bag, so you're always ready to manage or reinforce appropriate behaviour as needed. It's easy to give quickly and repeatedly for multiple repetitions. It's also usually highly motivating for your puppy.

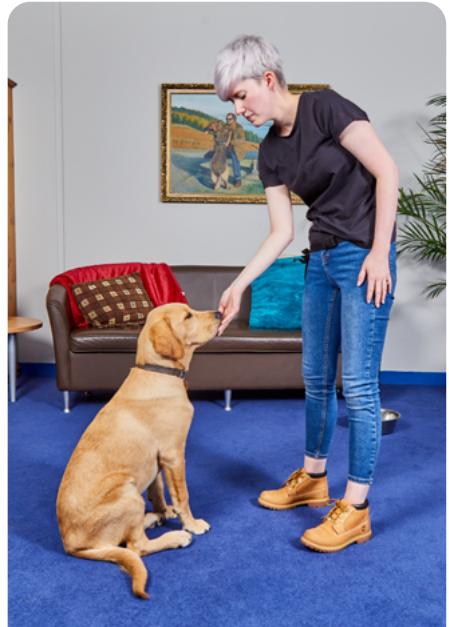
You should weigh out your puppy's daily food allowance and take food rewards from this allowance. Doing so will keep your puppy from gaining excess weight. Your puppy should never be kept hungry to increase their motivation for food rewards, so to begin with use food rewards from their middle feed or feeds as your training food rewards.

When you're using higher value food rewards or chews you'll need to reduce your puppy's daily food ration to ensure they don't become overweight.

Whilst food is a powerful tool to help shape your puppy's behaviour, your puppy may find toys or touch equally rewarding.

Luring vs reward

Luring is holding a piece of food or toy in front of your puppy's nose and using it to get your puppy into a certain position. You might lure your puppy to kick-start or encourage a behaviour. In the short-term luring can be really helpful. However, it's very important that you fade out this lure as soon as you can. If not, your puppy will become reliant on it and won't perform a behaviour without it being present.



Lure: Food reward placed on puppy's nose and puppy lured into desired position.



Reward: Food reward taken from treat bag and given to puppy once the puppy was in the car.

Reliance on lures interferes with your puppy's ability to focus on their behaviour. It's a bit like when you're following someone in the car to reach a destination. You're not really concentrating on the directions, just the car in front. If you try to drive the same route again, you're likely to struggle to remember the route you took. If you had worked out the route with a map and navigated there yourself, you would have been much more likely to remember where to go.

General guidance for using lures:

- Lure up to three times with the reward in your hand
- Then prompt up to three times without the reward in your hand
- Then stop using the lure and wait for your puppy to offer the behaviour

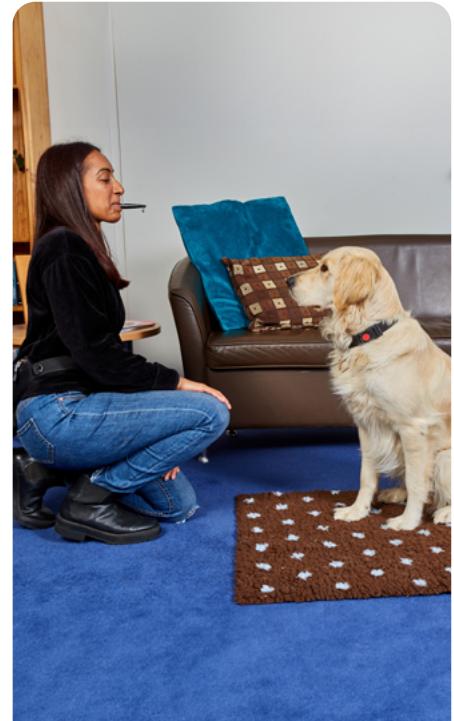
If your puppy doesn't perform the behaviour, don't rush to bring the lure back. You might inadvertently train your puppy to wait until the food or toy appears before they will display the behaviour.

Marker training

Another tool that you can use to help aid your puppy's learning is marker training. Marker training has been used with a wide range of animals since the 1940s. It pairs a marker (normally a sound) with a reinforcer (normally food).

This marker is then used to tell your puppy the exact moment they have done something you want them to. It's like taking a picture of the behaviour you want to see again. It's a very clear way of communicating to your puppy exactly what it is that got them a reward.

At Guide Dogs we use a verbal marker ('yep'). Your Puppy Development Advisor will provide guidance on if you should do this and how. Generally, clickers are only used by our trainers when our dogs enter formal training.



A puppy raiser using a marker whistle.

Reinforcement vs punishment

Just as with reinforcement, it's your puppy who decides if a consequence is punishing or not. Punishment doesn't necessarily mean using verbal or physical corrections. In behavioural terms, it's anything your puppy finds unpleasant or scary which reduces the likelihood of a behaviour happening again.

If you have a shy puppy, meeting a new person who picks them up, cuddles and kisses them could be extremely uncomfortable. The experience is likely to be punishing for them – reducing their desire to interact with people in the future. If you have an outgoing puppy, such human interactions will most likely be reinforcing and increase their desire to interact with people.

Reinforcement still means consequences

While your focus is on using reinforcement to shape your puppy's behaviour, this doesn't mean that your puppy should be allowed to do whatever they want without consequences.

This brings us back to management and trying to prevent the behaviour you don't want, and teaching what you do want. By thinking proactively and being one step ahead of your puppy whenever possible.

Consider how you want your puppy to behave and what you want them to learn in a given situation. Prepare the environment to make sure that learning takes place. This means learning about and responding to your puppy's individual needs. What is their body language telling you, and how do you need to adapt your plans given that feedback? The goal is to avoid your puppy practising unwanted behaviours by managing and promoting the behaviours you do want, rather than getting into situations where your puppy can make mistakes. This will strengthen the desired behaviours until they become automatic responses to given situations, experiences, or cues.



A puppy eating a chew on a rug.

Behaviours become habits

Dogs, like us, will develop habits in situations they come across often. These habits are likely to be their first-choice behaviours in situations where they are unsure of what to do.

By encouraging your puppy to sit for attention, food or anything else they want on a regular basis, sitting for something will become second nature and happen without you needing to cue it every time. This behaviour can transfer to other situations because it's been reinforced so often.

Habits can form quickly and might not always be the habits you want. If you continue to let your puppy jump up before sitting, it's likely that the jumping up will become part of their behaviour pattern. They will jump up, and then sit for attention, because this is what they have practised. You'll need to manage your puppy so that they simply sit, without jumping, rewarding them keeping four paws on the floor.

Similarly, if when the doorbell rings your puppy barks at the front door before going to their bed, the doorbell is the trigger to bark at the door and then go to their bed. To avoid this, practise putting high value food rewards on their bed as the doorbell goes. Prevent them from running to the front door by using baby gates or shutting doors. We will cover this exercise in more detail as your puppy progresses.

Puppies do what works and what gets reinforced. If behaviour you don't want is persisting you need to be conscious that it is being reinforced somehow – either by the feeling it gives your puppy, something in the environment or by your behaviour during or after the behaviour takes place.



A puppy raiser and their puppy getting ready to go on a walk.

Cues not commands

You may be used to giving your puppy a command to sit, or to lie down, which they are compelled to follow. Using the terminology ‘command’ suggests that the puppy has no choice but to comply. Our dogs are increasingly being given choices in their behaviour and eventual role as a guide dog or buddy dog. Instead of ‘commands’ we use ‘cues’ which can be verbal (e.g. sit), visual (e.g. a hand signal), or contextual (e.g. your puppy goes to their bed while you are preparing dinner). Cues give your puppy information about the behaviour you want.

If your puppy is not responding to cues think about how you can make it more reinforcing for them to do so.

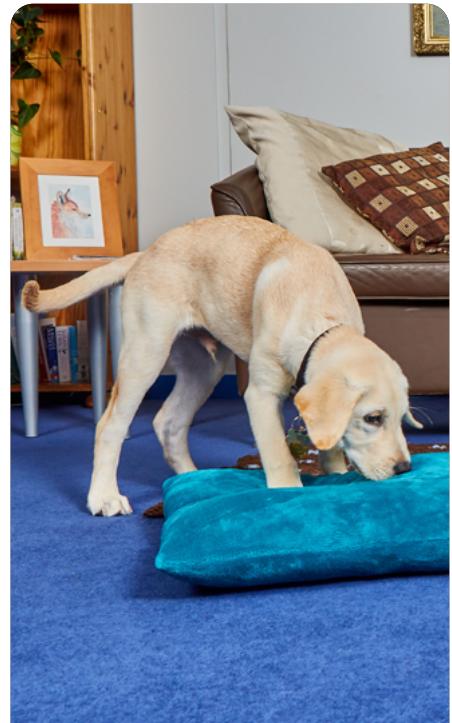
No need to use instructions for routine behaviours

Many of the foundation behaviours your puppy needs to learn do not require a verbal cue to prompt the behaviour. The prompt comes from the context or situation which your puppy finds themselves in.

Through consistency, good management, and effective reinforcement, your puppy will learn that for behaviours which happen multiple times a day to do them without needing to be asked (e.g. ignoring people or keeping their feet on the ground whilst having their lead).

This will help them when they are a working guide dog and they need to respond to multiple cues from the environment.

In summary, by making the environment cue the behaviour, your puppy is doing the work not you. As a guide dog, partnered someone who has a vision impairment, the ability to know how to behave without being told is an asset.



A puppy sniffs their bed on the floor.

When we do need cues

For some behaviours (for example, recall), an auditory cue is essential. Auditory cues can be verbal cues, 'sit', 'down', 'stand', 'come', or a whistle.

You can also use visual cues, (such as hand signals), to communicate the behaviour you want your puppy to do. Initially, none of the sounds or signals you use mean anything to your puppy until they make the necessary association between the cue, the behaviour, and the reinforcement that follows.

Teach the behaviour first. Then when you are confident that your puppy can do the behaviour quickly and reliably, you can add a cue. If you add the cue while your puppy is still learning the behaviour, it may take them longer to learn it,

To get a behaviour on cue, say (or show) the cue just before the behaviour occurs. Remember to only give a cue once. If you repeat the cue you may end up teaching your puppy to display the behaviour only when you have given the cue several times.



Cue (hand signal)



Behaviour



Reward

For example, to teach a sit:

- Lure your puppy into a sit using a piece of food in your hand
- Give the reward while your puppy's bottom is on the floor
- After a few repetitions, start using the same hand signal to ask for the sit but without the food in your hand. Reward from your other hand once your puppy's bottom is on the floor
- Once your puppy will reliably sit, using just the hand signal, you can introduce the cue by saying 'sit' just before giving the hand signal

Your puppy will now know the behaviour well enough to associate 'sitting behaviour' with the verbal cue 'sit'. You also have a fall-back cue (the visual hand signal, and the lure) for situations where your puppy may struggle to respond to the verbal cue e.g., in a new or distracting environment.



Being a partnership

The human/animal bond

Punishment and you

It's far better to prevent your puppy doing behaviours you don't want through proactive management (managing for success) rather than attempting to deal with the consequences. Prevention is always better than cure. You can take steps to encourage and reinforce the desirable behaviours which you do want (teaching foundations).

Any punishment can be scary for a puppy. Fear will damage the human-dog relationship and may create negative associations with the environment where the punishment takes place. This is a concern for any dog, but particularly for a potential guide dog who we need to feel safe and confident in all environments. When something happens that worries your puppy, you want them to look to you for support.

If you act in a way that your puppy finds punishing, you may confuse your puppy and create or add to their anxiety. They will see that sometimes you're a source of good things, but at other times you're scary or unpredictable. Being a source of positive outcomes for your puppy will give you the strongest possible relationship and increase your puppy's trust in you.



A puppy meeting another dog on a walk.

Acting on what you see

To avoid bad experiences for your puppy, it's important to be aware of their body language. This will give you an indication of how they're feeling and whether they're uncomfortable or overwhelmed in a situation.

For example, your puppy may slow down as they approach an object or a person. This tells you that they're unsure if it's safe and they want more time to assess the situation. Let your puppy stop if they want to. It's better that they approach in their own time rather than to encourage or force them into a situation where they're not fully comfortable and may panic or become distressed.

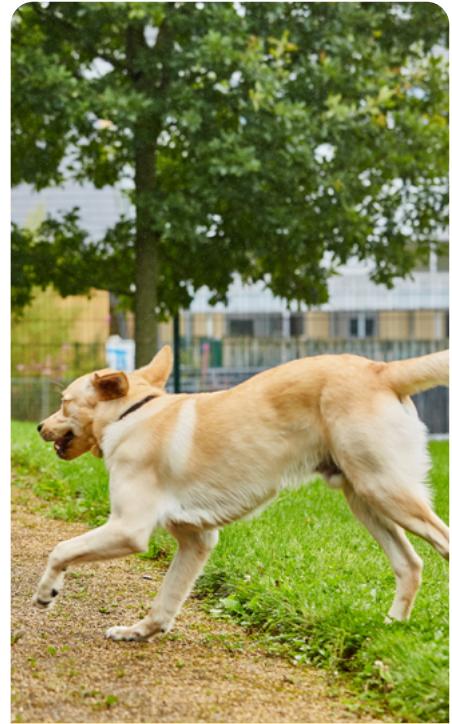
Giving your puppy choice in this way will increase their confidence and help them learn to manage their own behaviour.

Distance is your friend

In all situations where you believe your puppy is not coping, either because they are over-excited or fearful, you can help them cope by reducing the intensity of the experience. Either move further away or remove the cause of their excitement or fear. Distance reduces the intensity of what your puppy is experiencing and helps them learn to cope. Over time you can reduce the distance, as they start to manage themselves in these situations.

Being your puppy's safety net

Both puppies and adult dogs can be scared by novel experiences or items. When these situations arise it's important your puppy regards you as their safety net. By consistently reinforcing appropriate behaviour and preventing behaviour you don't want, you will maximise the welfare of your puppy and build a supportive relationship. Your puppy will view you as someone who will protect them and provide support.



A puppy off lead, running across a path.

They will naturally turn to you for support when they are unsure or uncertain. You can strengthen that natural instinct by responding in a way that helps them feel more secure. For instance, you can reduce the intensity of the situation or reward them for looking at you. This reward can also help to build a positive association with the situation.

Creating a positive life bank account balance

You want your time together and your puppy's experiences to be as positive and fun as possible. This will aid their development and growth into a confident, well-rounded adult dog. It will also mitigate against any negative experiences that prevent long-term fear and/or anxiety.

Think about building these positive experiences in terms of paying money into a bank account. You are creating a 'life bank account' for your puppy which they can draw on when negative experiences occur. It is impossible to shield your puppy from every potentially stressful or unpleasant situation (withdrawals), but you can try to keep any negative experiences to a minimum and create plenty of positive experiences (deposits) to set your puppy up for success.

In summary, you want to ensure that your puppy has a large positive balance in their 'life bank account'. That way, you can help ensure a negative experience (or 'withdrawal') will have minimal impact and is outweighed by the positive balance you have established.



A puppy raiser giving their puppy a treat.

This is important for all dogs, but particularly important for puppies, juveniles and adolescents who may experience times when they are less confident. For example, vet visits often involve injections and other potentially uncomfortable procedures which many puppies will find unpleasant and punishing.

To counter this, first introduce handling and veterinary equipment in a positive and controlled way at home (deposit) with familiar and then unfamiliar people. Over several weeks and months carry out multiple visits to your vet which involve cuddles, play, food rewards and low intensity examinations (further deposit). By doing so you can build a positive balance which will not be completely withdrawn by visits to the vet for injections or operations in the future.



A puppy raiser and puppy walking outside.