

Important things vs. urgent things

Dog behavior professionals speak in terms of *important* vs. *urgent* things to teach your puppy. Overall, *important* things are the behaviors that, if properly taught, will allow you to enjoy a truly beneficial relationship with your dog throughout his life. *Urgent* things are behaviors that are more pressing early on in your puppy's training agenda. For example, bite inhibition (teaching your dog to have a "soft mouth") is ultimately the most *important* thing for your dog to learn, however, because you have until your puppy is about 4 ½-months old for him to be able to developmentally "get it", it's not the most *urgent* thing on the list.

The Most Urgent Things to Teach Your Puppy

1. Household Etiquette
2. Home Alone
3. Socialization with People
4. Dog-Dog Socialization
5. Sit and Settle Down Commands
6. Bite Inhibition

Household Etiquette- from day one

Housetraining, chewtoy-training, and teaching your puppy alternatives to natural (but undesirable) behaviors, such as recreational barking or destructive chewing, is your most urgent priority.

From day one, use errorless management teaching programs – managing the puppy's environment so mistakes are virtually impossible to make – comprising confinement schedules plus the liberal use of chewtoys (Kong's, Biscuit Balls, hollow bones) stuffed with kibble.

Home Alone – during the first few days and weeks your puppy is at home

Teaching your puppy to enjoy spending time at home alone ensures that he will follow household etiquette rules when left unsupervised, as well as prevent him from becoming anxious in your absence.

If you've taken time off work for your new puppy's arrival, be sure to give him periods throughout the day of solitary confinement in his puppy playroom or crate. Be sure to give him some form of "occupational therapy" (stuffed chewtoys) to busy himself and enjoyable pass the time while you're away.

Socialization with People – always, but especially before twelve weeks of age

Focus on teaching your puppy to enjoy the company and actions of people. Show family members, visitors, and anyone who comes in contact with your puppy how to get your puppy to come, sit, lie down, and enjoy being handled for pieces of kibble. When you're with your puppy around new people and in new situations, illustrate that "new" and "different" equal "no big deal" by remaining calm and largely ignoring sights, and sounds that might be unusual in the environment.

During puppy's first month at home, he should meet and interact positively with at least 100 different people, so don't hesitate to take him out and about with you on your daily errands.

Dog-Dog Socialization – between three months and 18 weeks

As soon as puppy turns 3 months old (and has been immunized), it's time for puppy classes, long walks, and visits to dog parks. Well-socialized dogs would rather play than bite or fight, and well-socialized dogs usually bite more gently if ever they should bite or fight.

Teach your puppy the polite way to greet other dogs – head-to-butt for a round of getting-to-know-you sniffing. Realize that most adolescent and adult dogs feel compelled to "teach" puppies the ropes (and can appear downright cranky to puppies), so, while of course you must keep your puppy safe, don't overreact or try to overly manage other dogs' communications with your puppy. Unless the other dog is truly aggressive or may inadvertently hurt your puppy because it's too rough, you don't want your puppy to sense your anxiety about meeting other dogs. That being said, don't be shy about stepping between another dog and your puppy, and stepping toward the other dog (to back him off) if you feel the other dog is "dangerous" to puppy. This body language (I call it the "step and claim") where you "claim" your puppy and force the other dog to move back will be interpreted as strong leadership by both dogs.

Sit and Settle Down Commands – begin anytime you would like your puppy to listen to you

If you were to only teach your dog 2 commands, they should be "sit" and "settle". These basic commands can keep puppy out of trouble and keep him from being annoying to those who might not want to experience him up close and personal.

Use a food lure to teach "sit", and be sure to mark the behavior (with a clicker or a "yes!") the moment puppy's butt hits the ground. To teach "settle", say that word whenever puppy is lying calmly and earning attention or treats. Soon your puppy will associate the word "settle" (and calm behavior) with something positive (a treat).

Bite Inhibition – by 18 weeks of age

Hopefully your puppy spent his early weeks in a litter with his mother and littermates who didn't hesitate to let him know when he bit too hard. Mouthing is a completely natural and necessary puppy behavior; if a puppy is not allowed to play-bite, he can't develop reliable bite inhibition. Bite inhibition training requires first teaching the puppy to progressively inhibit the *force* of its bites until painful puppy play biting is toned down and transformed into gentle puppy mouthing. Then, and only then, do you start teaching puppy to progressively inhibit the *incidence* of his mouthing. Puppy learns that mouthing is by and large inappropriate and that any pressured bite is absolutely unacceptable.

Puppy classes (or your dog trainer) are a good place to seek advice if you're concerned about your puppy's biting behavior.