

Teaching Good House Behavior

Goal Behavior

A guide dog is expected to live unconfined with its human partner. Good house behavior is essential for a guide dog as blind clients may be unaware of their canine partner's behavior while loose in the home. Puppies returning to campus for formal training should have good house manners instilled in them; a dog that is unreliable in the home cannot succeed as a guide. (See document "Final Goal Behaviors")

Home behavior requirements for young dogs entering guide training:

- Not destructive of and does not ingest, personal items/clothing or plants - indoors or out. Does not chew furnishings, wood trim etc.
- Leaves personal items alone - does not pick up or relocate items
- Leaves people food alone - whether on the ground or on a counter/table. Does not attempt to grab food from hands.
- Trained to relieve outdoors, on leash and on cue - never in the home.
- Remains quiet (no vocalization).
- Able to settle easily and is not unduly excitable or rambunctious, including when visitors arrive.
- Trustworthy left unconfined and unattended in the home for a minimum of 30 minutes (preferred goal of at least 2 hours) without incident.

The documents "Prevention of Destructive Behavior", "Preventing Counter Surfing" and "Teaching Settled (Calm) Behavior in the Home" contain specific instructions on teaching puppies these topics.

The Basic Concepts

Raisers should focus on teaching desirable behaviors with positive reinforcement and preventing the puppy from practicing undesirable behaviors. Corrective methods might be indicated when positive or non-reinforcing methods are not effective in teaching good house manners. Raisers should consult with their leader or CFR if their puppy continues to exhibit undesirable house behavior despite positive methods and good management.

- Puppies will repeat behaviors that are rewarding to them. If rewarded (food rewards, praise, interactive play) for a behavior by the raiser, the puppy will tend to repeat that behavior to receive rewards and attention.
- Some behaviors are intrinsically rewarding for puppies, e.g. destructive chewing. A puppy may accidentally discover some behaviors are rewarding, e.g. getting into kitchen trash. Controlling the puppy's environment, and preventing inappropriate behaviors, are essential to prevent the puppy from self-rewarding.

- If a behavior doesn't result in a rewarding experience, it is less likely to be repeated by the puppy.
- Some behaviors are attention-seeking by the puppy (e.g. keep-away, some types of vocalizing.) Ignoring these behaviors, when it is safe to do so, will result in the behavior extinguishing.
- Providing opportunities for alternative appropriate behaviors, such as picking up dog toys and chewing on them, along with appropriate reinforcement, will teach the puppy *what to do*. This is positive puppy raising and preferable to having to correct the puppy for undesirable behavior.
- Raisers should take care not to reinforce undesirable behaviors unintentionally. As an example, although it is better that the puppy carries the TV remote control to the raiser rather than destroying it, if rewarded for doing so, a "behavior chain" will be established: the puppy will be more likely to repeat the undesirable behavior of picking up the remote control because of the attention received. It is preferable to reward the puppy for ignoring the object and/or limit the opportunity by keeping the remote out of the puppy's reach in the first place.

Management

A guide dog needs to have solid house behavior; however it takes time and diligence to instill appropriate behavior in a young pup. The importance of management cannot be stressed enough in developing desirable responses in the home. As the puppy matures and is appropriately reinforced, it will start to distinguish what is allowable and what is not. Until that time, it is up to the raiser to ensure that the only choices a puppy can make are good choices.

When the raiser cannot actively supervise the puppy it should be safely confined in a crate, x-pen or placed on a tie-down. As the pup earns more freedom in the home it should be set up for success by having areas cleared of temptations and "puppy proofed", unless the raiser is actively engaged in training the puppy in appropriate behavior.

The puppy should be kept in the same room as the raiser in the first few months it is given access to the home. When under direct supervision, the raiser can reward the pup in a timely manner for good behavior and interrupt unwanted behavior. As the puppy learns what is acceptable behavior it can be given more freedom to explore other rooms (where the puppy has been previously actively supervised and reinforced for desirable behavior.) The raiser should always be aware of where the pup is and what it is doing. Only when the pup is trustworthy loose in the house in multiple rooms with the raiser present, should the raiser consider leaving it loose alone.

Preparing the Puppy for Home Alone

Gradually the puppy may be given access to different rooms in the home but it is good management to confine the puppy to only one or two prepared rooms when first leaving the puppy loose alone. For full instructions on teaching a puppy to stay home alone, refer to the document "Home Alone".

Conclusion

Some puppies will take longer than others to be trustworthy house dogs and really “busy” pups are the most challenging. It is difficult to give time lines for when puppies should be ready to be left unattended in the home; each pup must be developed according to its individual temperament. In fact, some pups will be appropriate for several months then have a regression in behavior as they become adolescent. It is not unusual for raisers to have to go back to using a crate and gradually re-introduce the pup to freedom in the home after adolescence.

If a raiser feels that the puppy is not progressing as it should, the leader/CFR should be consulted. It is important that negative behaviors are not practiced by the puppy; the longer/more often a puppy repeats an undesirable behavior the more ingrained it will become. Setting the puppy up for success, and rewarding desirable behavior, will result in a young dog that is a pleasure to have in the home and is well-prepared to enter formal training.