

Teaching Settled (Calm) Behavior in the Home

Guide dog puppies need to learn from an early age to settle in the home environment. We speak of “calm” behavior in many situations and the document “Rewarding Calm Behavior” addresses how to encourage calm behavior in public settings and generally. Other documents address how to teach the puppy to ignore distractions. In this document, focus is on rewarding the puppy for choosing to settle in a home situation. If the puppy is rewarded appropriately, it will choose default calm behaviors, such as lying down in a relaxed manner, around the home.

As we train GDB puppies with food rewards, which they obviously enjoy, the puppies will tend to be energized when they believe the “game is on” and may start offering behaviors. Once learned, the marker “Nice!” produces a conditioned emotional response in the puppy – excitement. Because excitement is contrary to what we are looking for when teaching settled behavior, we do not use a verbal marker in this context. Raisers must be aware of the puppy’s state of mind and body language and reward only when the puppy is not anticipating, or thinking about, a food reward. If the puppy is rewarded for anticipating food it will result in staring at the handler and not demonstrating relaxed behavior. Rewards must be delivered in such a way so as to not stimulate the puppy. This is a little different from the behaviors we teach using the verbal marker. In teaching calm and settled behavior in the home we are “capturing” the desired behavior rather than “shaping” or “luring” as during teaching behaviors with a verbal marker.

Goal

A guide dog is expected to live unconfined with its human partner. Good house behavior is essential for a guide dog. Puppies returning to campus for formal training should be calm and settled in the home. They should be quiet and able to lie down, relaxed, for long periods, in one area. Casually walking around then quickly settling again is acceptable but constant pacing, or running at any time, are not behaviors we want to see in a potential guide. (See document “Final Goal Behaviors”)

Prerequisites

Puppies should be familiar with polite taking of food. Rewarding for settling can begin as soon as the puppy arrives into the raiser’s home.

Set Up

- As puppies will be rewarded frequently throughout the day, it is recommended that the raiser measure out the puppy’s daily food ration and take a portion to utilize in training. Any food remaining at the end of the day can be put back into the puppy’s bowl at feeding time.
- Raisers will always need food reward readily available, either on the person or at “stations” (stashed kibble, out of reach of the puppy, in designated areas in the home.)

- Raisers can practice rewarding the pup for settling at almost any time – while watching TV, at the computer etc. Eventually the pup will learn to relax even when the raiser is eating a meal or doing household chores.
- The young puppy should be in a confined area unless under the direct supervision of the raiser. Crate training is addressed in the document “Crate Introduction”. X-pens and baby gates are invaluable in making an area for the puppy to relax and play in when the raiser is home. A tie down may also be utilized. As the puppy matures it can be allowed more freedom, at first wearing a dragline. The area available to the puppy should be expanded as the pup proves it can settle appropriately.

Criteria for Rewarding Settled, Calm Behavior

- Puppy is awake
- Puppy is quiet
- If on-leash, the leash is loose with no contact on the pup’s collar
- Puppy is lying down (may be sitting but raiser must be sure the puppy is relaxed and body language fits other criteria.)
- Puppy is not staring intently at the handler (rewarding for staring at the handler is rewarding for arousal and excitement)
- Puppy is not thinking about food

Some indicators the puppy is relaxed (not necessary that all are fulfilled to show relaxation):

- Sleepy/soft eyes and expression
- Relaxed ears
- Head down
- Rolled on a hip or laid flat on the floor
- Deep sighs
- Slow blinking

Sometimes the raiser can help the pup relax by patterning relaxation themselves. Some cues that dogs will pick up from humans:

- Breathing deeply and slowly
- Slow, exaggerated blinks
- Relaxed posture and muscles
- Relaxed stillness, especially in the hands
- Directing the gaze away from the puppy

Food Delivery

- The puppy should fulfill the above criteria for at least 30 seconds before reward. The time between rewards will be increased gradually until the puppy is only getting occasional rewards throughout the day for exhibiting calm behavior.

- The raiser should quietly reach for a piece of kibble or have some ready in the hand as they approach the pup
- Approach should be leisurely and relaxed with the raiser looking indirectly
- The kibble should be delivered straight to the puppy's mouth so that the puppy does not have to reach or break position to accept the reward.
- If the puppy becomes too excited in anticipation of food reward, the raiser should decrease the amount of food used and focus more on secondary reinforcers such as stroking and low-voiced, soothing praise.

General Suggestions to Increase Settled Behavior

- Having a comfortable dog bed available in each room the puppy spends time in will be helpful in teaching the puppy to relax. Most pups will seek out the cozy spot and quietly chew their toys or nap there. Dog beds and blankets must not be left unattended with a puppy until the pup is ready to spend time alone loose in the house (see the document "Teaching Good House Behavior" and the documents on prevention of counter surfing and destructive behavior.)
- Should the puppy jump up on X-pens or baby gates in excitement as the handler approaches, the handler should back away. When the pup settles, with four on the floor, the handler may approach again. The pup will quickly realize that only when it remains calm with its feet on the floor, will the handler continue approaching to reward.
- Excited behavior by pet dogs will have a negative impact on the puppy. GDB puppies should not be exposed to running, rough-housing pets until they have had extensive work on tethering techniques with increased distractions. The puppy should be separated from dogs that do not set good examples. A mellow, older dog is an excellent mentor for a puppy. (See document "Dog to Dog Interaction".)
- Visitors to the home should be instructed to ignore the puppy. This may mean asking visitors to not look at, talk to, or touch the puppy. The puppy should be set up for success and unfortunately, many visitors to the household will not understand what this means. Visitors can help the raiser with training by following instructions while the raiser practices tethering exercises with the puppy. This way, the pup will learn to keep its focus on its handler and be calm when strangers visit and try to interact with the puppy - ideal guide dog behavior!
- As the pup is given more freedom, a dragline should be utilized. Occasionally the puppy may become too rowdy, or offer other inappropriate behavior in the home, despite a high reinforcement history for calm behavior. A dragline will enable the raiser to quickly regain control of the puppy. Once the puppy settles, meeting the above criteria, it can again be rewarded either with food or slow, calm stroking and praise.

Naturally lower-energy puppies will be easier to teach to settled house behavior. More active puppies will need closer supervision and raiser focus to capture those times when the puppy is offering settled behavior. Higher-energy puppies will benefit from practicing the shaping and luring exercises (tethering games, leash

walking games, paw pad games etc.) more frequently, and/or being allowed off-leash fun with a Jolly Ball in the yard, before being asked to settle inside. If the puppy continues to be vocal, unsettled or generally “busy” in the house, despite the positive methods outlined above, the raiser should contact their leader/CFR for further advice.