



Behavior and Training Department

Resources

How to get the most out of your training class:

The bad news is that going through the motions of signing up for a class will not guarantee you a well trained dog. The good news however, is that there are a number of things you can do to get the most bang for your buck when you sign up and attend a class with your canine pal.

Motivation First of all, pat yourself on the back for taking the initiative to sign up for a class! Signing up for a class is a valuable investment in your dog's future and shows motivation on your part. It allows you and your dog to work together as a team and build a strong relationship while instilling good manners. If something were ever to happen down the road, and you were unable to care for your dog, your dog would have a much easier time finding a good home if he comes trained with at least the basics.

Scheduling Make sure you pick a day and time that fits into your schedule. Avoid coming straight from the stress of work and if you aren't a morning person, maybe the 9am class isn't the one for you. Try to choose a time where you and your dog are alert and ready to learn.

Attend class It seems simple, but with our busy schedules it can sometimes be tempting to take a night off. Remind yourself it is only an hour of your day. Missing a class can put you farther behind and you may miss out on an invaluable explanation. A weekly class can also be the prodding you need to keep on practicing on a regular basis.

Read the homework assignment Instructors send out valuable tips and information in their post-class homework assignments. Don't just gloss these over. Read them carefully as they will help you remember what was covered in class and may even explain an exercise in a different way. Be sure to put the homework assignments into practice throughout the week.

Be punctual If you arrive late you miss out on valuable information. Arriving late can also be distracting to other dogs and people in the class. Your dog may not have enough time to settle into the environment before you need to ask him or her to start working with you. An instructor may also need to spend additional time catching you and your dog up.

Bring the whole family Whenever possible make sure the whole family comes to class. This will help make sure everyone is on the same page with training. Less arguments will arise on how exactly to teach Spot to "sit" and your dog will be much happier when everyone is consistent in what they ask. Consistency is one of the keys to training!

Turn off your cell phone Better yet, leave it in the car. Not only will you not be the person everyone looks at when your phone starts playing your favorite tune in the middle of class, but you can be more wholly present for your dog without your cell phone vibrating in your pocket.

Exercise your dog beforehand A dog that is jumping out of its skin with excitement and energy is not able to concentrate. Make sure your dog receives adequate exercise on a regular basis, and especially before a class. Don't overdo it either. If you go on a marathon 10 mile hike before class Spot may be too tired to heel at your side.

Listen Take in what the instructor is saying and really digest the information. Stay open to new ideas and suggestions and give it a try first. You may have your doubts at first, but then be pleasantly surprised by what you and your dog can accomplish together. Do ask questions if an exercise or technique is confusing or you need assistance.

Hold off on a meal Avoid giving Spot his meal right before a class. If he is full from dinner, he will be less inclined to want to work for delicious treats during class. Also, if you are feeding treats during class, take out some of those calories from your dog's next meal. The idea is not to add pounds onto your dog during training class, but to encourage him with small treats.

Practice, practice, practice! Practice makes perfect. Without practicing what you learn in class you cannot perfect your cues and your dog does not have a chance to learn. Repetition is key and it has been postulated that a dog does not really learn a behavior until they have practiced it 500 times. Also, practice in different environments. Dogs are visual place learners. Just because Spot can do a "down" in your kitchen does not mean he can do a "down" at the park or even in your front yard.

Know what motivates your dog What gets your dog's tail wagging? Is it a game of fetch? Tug of war? Really yummy treats? Or a smile and a pat from you? Know what gets your dog's attention and incorporate it into training sessions. Remember, it is what is exciting to your dog, not what we find exciting.

Good stuff makes a difference! Bring yummy treats to class and when you are training at home. Dogs definitely know the difference between the usual kibble and something a little extra special like chicken or string cheese. Remember, your treats do not need to be big, just frequently given when your dog is on the right track.

Play! Training with your dog should be fun, but many of us get have a tendency to get overly serious during training sessions. Take breaks often to be silly and play with your dog. This will make the process much more fun for your pooch and will help you shed some training stress instead of inadvertently taking it out on your dog.

Keep training sessions short and frequent In order to best utilize your dog's attention, keep sessions short and frequent. Train in 10-15 minute intervals (puppies much shorter) throughout the day instead of trying to tackle all your cues in one long block of time. Incorporate training into your day to day routine. Ask for a sit before delivering your dog's meal or have your dog "wait" before jumping out of the car after a trip to the park.

Have a friend video tape you It's amazing the things we find ourselves doing (or not doing) when we are training our dogs. Video can provide you with lots of great feedback in regards to your handling and the way you work with your dog. Is what you see on video what you think you are doing when working with your dog?

Reward, reward, reward! The biggest thing instructors notice in beginning classes is that handlers do not reward their dogs enough. Don't be stingy with the treats. A treat is your way of telling your dog they are on the right track.

Catch your dog being good! We tend to focus on what we want our dogs to stop doing and forget to put emphasis on what we want them to do. If your dog refrains from jumping on a guest when they enter your house reward that. When rewarded for doing the right thing, your dog is much more likely to make that same choice the next time.

Reward yourself! Positive reinforcement works both ways. Be sure to give yourself breaks and cut yourself a little slack. No dog and no person is perfect. When you do a good job training, be sure to reward yourself.

When dealing with training and behavioral issues it is advised to get professional assistance.

Sonoma Humane offers a variety of training classes, behavioral consultations, in-home training, and private sessions.

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