

Send Your Puppy to School

Your puppy will learn a lifetime of skills at puppy kindergarten.

Arden Moore

It's never too early to learn especially if you're a puppy. In fact, puppies act like computer databanks, lapping up knowledge with each tail-wagging step. Those that enroll in formal puppy schools often graduate into well-socialized adults. "This is an animal with feelings," says Soraya Juarbe-Diaz, D.V.M., a veterinarian and diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists who practices in South Florida. "It needs your love and your attention. Just like children, puppies are not born with perfect manners. They will make mistakes and need to be taught appropriate behaviors and skills." Even if you strive to be the best pet parent in town, your puppy still needs exposure to people, pets and places outside your home to fully develop its social skills, shape its personality and hone a positive attitude. Consistent training and lots of playful interactions can help your puppy grow into a smart and happy dog. The solution: Enroll your new furry friend in a puppy socialization class or hire a professional trainer to come to your home. The ideal time: around 12 to 16 weeks, once your puppy has received its first round of vaccinations and has been deemed healthy by your veterinarian. "Puppies take work to raise in many ways, they are just like babies," says Nicholas Dodman, B.V.M.S., a veterinarian and director of the Behavior Clinic at Tufts University School of Veterinary Medicine in North Grafton, Massachusetts. "The more you arrange for them to experience pleasant and happy circumstances, the more they will develop into happy, well-adjusted adults." Professional dog trainer Bryon Davies literally encircles her life with puppies and loves every spirited second. When she isn't working with shelter animals at the Potter League for Animals in Middletown, Rhode Island, or conducting formal puppy classes, she fosters shelter puppies at the ranch-style home she shares with her husband, William, and her five mentoring adult dogs. "I tell people that I have the best job in the world," says Davies. "Puppies are so eager. They're practically begging to learn." Davies relies on positive reinforcement techniques. She conditions puppies with the sound of clickers and rewards appropriate puppy responses with tasty bite-sized treats. Mistakes are ignored and successes are praised. "Puppies are very motivated by food," she says. "In class, I keep cut-up pieces of pepperoni inside my sweatshirt pouch or fanny pack so I can reach for one the instant the puppy masters a command or activity." The food treat is barely bigger than the size of your fingernail purposely. "You want to give a puppy a small taste that it can eat quickly. That's why I don't give biscuits. It can take some puppies a couple minutes to finish a biscuit, and by then, you've lost the flow of learning," Davies adds.