

Dogs and Kids

Kids in Puppy Class? Why not?

by Joan Orr and Teresa Lewin

Kids in puppy class? Many families want to train the puppy together. Some kids are natural trainers. On the other hand, kids can distract parents or disrupt the class. In the worst case kids can create a dangerous situation by antagonizing other dogs and creating a bite risk.

We have had all these types of kids in Teresa's dog classes. Kids are always welcome, without exception. We think it is important for kids to be involved and to hear the instructions from the trainer, not second hand from the parent. Our classes focus on developing a bond with the dog, understanding dog body language, communicating with the dog and creating an environment that ensures a happy emotional state. The primary communication tool is the clicker. The primary reinforcer is food (or sometimes toys). Behaviour problems with both dogs and kids have dropped to pretty close to zero since the classes have gone totally clicker. Everyone enjoys being able to communicate clearly to the dog "Yes, I love what you are doing, can you do that again?".

Here are some of the approaches that we have found has helped to keep kids focused in puppy class.

The first class is for people only. Kids are encouraged to come. The class receives a lesson in reading dog body language using the Be a Tree teacher kit from Doggone Safe. This is short, fun and informative. Next we play clicker timing games to practice clicker skills. These were created by TAGteach International and can be found at the website www.tagteach.com. Then we play the training game. Kids love to "be the dog". Everyone has a clicker and clicks as a group as "the dog" gets closer to the desired behavior. We also play a cueing game that teaches people how to establish cues for behaviour without speaking. This is an abbreviated derivative of the new game "You Don't Say", available at the KPCT website

www.clickertraining.com. By the end of the first session the kids and parents have had lots of fun and practice clicking, they understand about the displaced behaviors that signal anxiety in their dog and they understand about shaping and building behaviours piece by piece without talking. For homework they receive the free handouts that can be downloaded from the KPCT website and are to go home and play the 101 things with a box game with their dog. This class lets the kids get all their clicker sillies out.

In subsequent classes kids have specific jobs to do. In the first class with the dogs they go off with a junior trainer to play the Doggone Crazy! board game and learn about safety around dogs. This gives the parents some time alone. Kids are then assigned the job of clicking, holding the leash or delivering the treat. This way up to three people can be involved and none is overwhelmed. The training becomes collaborative and the kids no longer need to vie for Mum's attention. It seems easier for adults than kids sometimes to become comfortable with clicker training. Kids don't over analyze or worry too much about mistakes. Since they are relaxed and having fun, this is translated down the leash to dog, facilitating and good learning environment for both kids and puppy.

Very young children (3-5 year olds) can click for very obvious things (like dog's rear hits the floor), hold a double leash with the parent and toss treats for the puppy (yes we allow puppies to eat off the floor since with clicker training we can easily teach them to keep their heads up later). Older children (6-9 year olds) can work together with a parent watching. They can get involved in more movement exercises and more complicated tricks. They can give the puppy food from their hands if the puppy is not too nippy. Most kids 10 and up can work independently with the puppy. They can also do relay races, musical chairs and "say hello" exercises with other people's puppies from the class.

Children can also be involved in classes with older dogs, but this requires more supervision and precaution. Children should not interact with other people's dogs. A dog with a resource guarding issue and a child with food is not a good combination! Potential behavior issues with dogs or kids need to be assessed and addressed. Most issues with kids can be solved the same way as dog issues, by setting up for success, making expectations clear, using positive reinforcement and focusing on maintaining a happy emotional state.

Our biggest challenge was 5-year old, Susie (not her real name) who grabbed the dogs and even picked up the small ones. We solved this problem by having a junior trainer click Susie for any appropriate behaviour. Susie got to put a sticker on a sheet after every click. She began looking for good things to do. She also got clicked for being nice to her dog rather than yanking him. We only had to do this for one session and then Susie was happy to engage in appropriate behaviors and was praised for this.

So give kids a chance and a job to do and they will come through. Once the puppy starts to realize that it can influence the child to produce a click and a treat and begins to offer behaviours and repeat them, the whole process becomes very reinforcing for the child. Any extraneous clicking will stop as the child realizes that he can communicate with the puppy and influence its behaviour. Positive reinforcement training builds empathy as children learn that animals do indeed have emotions, can think and are pleased to be part of the training process. The benefits go beyond puppy class as kids learn to see positive reinforcement rather than punishment as a way to influence the behavior of others. Children will be more likely to transfer their experiences with pets to other children and when they grow up, will hopefully be less likely to use punishment.

Trainers should consult with their legal representatives and insurance carriers to ensure all reasonable precautions have been addressed.