

A healthy puppy brims with enthusiasm as he investigates every detail of his world. A moving object will inspire his complete attention, causing him to fall over himself in hot pursuit. When raising a puppy with an agility competition future in mind, we do not wish to extinguish this emotional outlet for our puppy but to build on it. A harmonious relationship and balance between the drive and enthusiasm of the agility dog and the drive and enthusiasm of the handler is one of the most important attributes of a successful team. From day one, every interaction with a puppy will influence his future attitude toward training and competition.

Agility is all about the relationship between dog and handler so those early weeks together are very important.

By Kathryn Lofthouse, photos by DianeLewisPhotography.com

Starting Out Right

Building on a Puppy's Natural Drive and Instinct



Play with Your Puppy

It all starts the day you and your puppy meet. How you recognize and build upon your puppy's natural drive and enthusiasm for life is critical to his future training. How many agility handlers wish that their adult dogs had half the enthusiasm for agility as they routinely display for chasing squirrels? What if that amount of enthusiasm could be directed toward the agility course?

To encourage your puppy to feel that you, the handler, are part of the fun it is necessary to work truly hard at one thing that is not considered work at all: *Playing with your puppy!* For some dogs the handler is not part of the hunt, but is often viewed as somebody who ends the game. Unfortunately, for these dogs it may be too late for the handler to become part of the emotional high that hunting for prey provides.

Playing for an extended time is not required. In fact quite the opposite is true. Frequent short, physically demanding play periods of extreme fun can help to bring forth that connection you desire for future training. Discover the art of frivolity and immerse yourself in playing with your puppy so he can freely express his drive while in your company.



Try not to make the pup's upbringing too serious.

• Socialize your puppy in very small increments and always when he is at his most robust, not when he's hungry or tired. Always give him the security of knowing you will protect him and do so diligently, but without emotional input. Negative feelings are learned and once a stress response is generated in relation to his owner or environment, it will be difficult to overcome.

At this stage it is far better to keep your pup contained in an ex-pen with safe outlets for his drive when you cannot interact with him. Crate him when you have to leave so that your return is always a positive thing.



Don't Inadvertently Discourage Play

It is in our everyday lives with our puppy that a simple negative experience can affect our future relationship. A common scenario that occurs is an experience that might discourage a pup from playing with the handler in the future. At home, for example, resolve that you will always be pleased with him for picking something up in his mouth. Dogs that grow up in the average busy household can lack the confidence to play with toys in the company of their owners because they were "told off" as young pups for picking up the wrong thing. "Paying" your puppy with good treats for bringing you the pencil, child's toy, or sock that he was hoping to play with is well worth the effort. The alternative is for him to sneak away and chew it up, or to engage you in a game of keep-away, which is not recommended. If you observe this rule when you encourage your dog to play, there will be no conflict about whether or not his chosen "toy" is something he "should" be playing with; and he will be able to retain his prey drive in your presence without feelings of stress.



Use a system of prevention of mistakes in housetraining your puppy. Remember you are his future agility partner and any negative input from you will definitely be remembered. If you follow the above guidelines you should have a puppy that wants to be with you and considers being close to you a purely fun thing without conflicting emotions.

Encourage Play

Following are some tips for encouraging play and enhancing fun:

- To enhance his fun, it is good to play restrained-recall games where you have a friend or family member hold your puppy gently while you run away to call him with great enthusiasm. When he reaches you, praise him joyfully and reward with a fun game or tasty treats.
- Try not to make the pup's upbringing too serious. Often it seems that there is such an effort to play the "right" games that the actual emotional goofiness and the ability to just hang out with the pup may be lost. Enjoy playing with your puppy

Nurture Natural Drive

So how do we go about encouraging and building on our puppy's natural drive? Following are some tips.

- When you bring your puppy home take friends or family members with you so they can drive the car while you hold the pup in your lap for the return journey. This initial period is an invaluable bonding experience and should not be missed.
- Hand feed the pup the first week or so after he comes home. If you travel to agility trials bring the puppy out and hand feed him while in the trial environment. Hand feed as you walk about in a safe area. Give the pup brief, 5-minute periods of exposure to the environment and then let him rest in a private area where he can do what puppies need to do to grow up happy and well-adjusted: sleep!



because playtime is a huge investment in the future.

- Developing a sound such as “chi, ch, ch,” (much like the sound of lawn sprinklers) and linking it to the excitement of toy play is helpful. This sound can be used throughout the pup’s life to elicit prey drive and excitement when you want just a little more enthusiasm in future agility performances and can also be linked to obstacle performance when obstacle training begins.

- In the evening and the morning when the pup is feeling full of energy, encourage him to play for short periods with various toys. The two-toy game, where the handler uses two identical toys and throws one behind her as the pup brings one back is fun, engaging, and keeps you as the center of the game.

- I encourage my pups to chase a water hose or sprinkler. If they are not keen on this at first, I allow them to watch the adult dogs having a good time with this game. Very soon most pups join in. To have a dog that likes to play with a hose is an advantage at agility trials in the summer. With the use of a hose you have a way to both inspire your dog to get into the mood for a hunt and the means to cool him off in a fun way at the end of a run.

- When visiting a training venue or trial, check the situation for unfriendly or out-of-control dogs, and then bring the pup out to play for a minute or so at a safe distance from the action. Once the pup is

really having a good time, race the short distance back to your crate area acting like an excited school child. Fall on the floor breathless and celebrate the great time you had! This activity provides your pup a mini rehearsal of what it will be like to run agility. This rehearsal builds confidence and drive in your pup and, since the two of you are co-conspirators, you are also bonding and building upon pack behavior. Always make the move to go back to your crate area when the pup is fully immersed in the game. We can build his drive and confidence by allowing him to feel that he would like to do just a little bit more.

- Never underestimate the power of role modeling. Puppies copy adults and peers so give them the opportunity to see friendly, well-adjusted adult dogs happily engaging with you and having fun with their toys. The pup will pick up on the positive energy

and be keen to have a go himself as if he were thinking, “When I grow up I want to do that!”

- Eventually, you can ask for a behavior, such as a fast sit or down, and reward the pup’s quick response with a game. Spending ample time ensuring the pup has a very strong desire to play with you first in many different and variably stimulating environments can yield positive results both on and off the agility field.





Puppy Personalities

The Shy Pup

What about the shy puppy? Even within the same litter there are many different personalities and you may find yourself with a pup that is a little unsure. Shy pups may be slower to relax enough to feel comfortable playing. In this case your job is to maintain your frivolity and relaxed attitude without putting pressure on the puppy to play. If you persist in trying to get the pup to play when he is not yet comfortable, you will turn him off even more.

With this pup it may be helpful to use a non-threatening role model so he can watch how relaxed you and the other dog are playing together, which may gradually entice him to join in. All dogs react to moving objects to a greater or lesser degree, so if you can emulate the movement of a prey animal you should be able to encourage play in a healthy puppy. The use of a lunge line with a toy attached to the end can engage a shy pup as he will not feel any competition for the toy.

Do not watch a shy pup directly, but rather keep an eye on him peripherally and protect him without his knowing it. Give him little dips into the busy world, making these very worthwhile with lots of good treats. Some shy dogs will never tug, but they often will learn to chase a ball and this can be used to great advantage in agility training.

If I was allowed to do only one thing with a pup before the age of 18 months, I would choose to simply play with him in many different places.

The Reactive Pup

What about the pup who reacts to every moving object? All pups are visually stimulated and jerky movements will trigger prey drive to some degree. With the reactive puppy it is important that you provide movement and excitement before he learns to look for it elsewhere. The pup that is hardwired to react to moving objects should not be introduced to the excitement of agility until he has a strong desire to play with a toy and to engage his full enthusiasm and energy with you. Your job is to keep the toy exciting by moving it in a prey-like fashion and gradually to progress to the point where your pup can see the exciting movement of other dogs, and on a word or sound from you, he will happily and wholeheartedly engage with you in a game with a toy. This attitude must be built in small steps over a period of time, but to harness the boundless enthusiasm of such a dog is well worth the investment. Without the right outlet for his abundant drive such a pup could grow up regarding the movement of other dogs on course as his most desirable objective, which is not a good recipe for success.

Investing in the Future

I believe that a good agility round is like a successful hunt to the dog. The greatest dogs are working the agility course using a happy balance of both prey and pack drive in concert with their handlers. While dog and handler give 100% striving for that peak performance, it is the dog's bond with the handler that gives him the desire to go around the course under our direction. It is the expression of prey drive that makes the dog want to run the course as fast as possible for the opportunity of a game with





a toy and praise from a happy handler for a job well done.



Time spent playing with the puppy in your first few weeks together is possibly the most important foundation for your future agility training. If I was allowed to do only one thing with a pup before the age of 18 months, I would choose to simply play with him in many different places. Once a playful bond is established, it can be used to enhance his strong points and strengthen his weaknesses, making agility training so much easier.

A toy can be used as a tool to develop areas that may be lacking. For example, an independent pup can be encouraged to play close to his handler more often, and a Velcro puppy can be frequently rewarded for going away from his handler to seek the toy. A strong desire for the toy can be used throughout the dog's training, in addition to providing a great form of exercise and stress relief in everyday life.



So, let the games begin. Delight in your pup and enjoy every moment you spend together. Before you know it, he will be a confident young dog ready to become your enthusiastic agility teammate. 🐾



Kathy has been a USDAA Grand Prix Finalist with three English Shepherds, U-CDX Rufus MAD, EAC (1992); U-CD Purdy AAD, EAC (1996); and Bracken, MAD, EAC (1996); as well as Border Collie, ADCH MACH2 Nel, EAC (2000 GP finals and 2004 Veterans GP, 2nd place). Currently competing with Working Sheepdogs ADCH T.C. MX, MXJ, and Daz AAD, OA, NAJ and training her young English Shepherd, Emma, Kathy enjoys helping handlers bring out the best in their dogs and is available for private training and seminars. Contact Kathy at runjumpweave@prodigy.net or through her website at www.petdoorsandmore.com.



always does it perfectly in practice  If only we got extra points for extra obstacle 


 I wish he'd get the confidence to work ahead of me  She starts sniffing as soon



at the start line **Think you've got motivation or self-control issues?** We disconnect



ted twenty seconds getting onto the table  She simply refuses to play  He ran on


ive up  You'd think I was asking him to walk on hot coals  She doesn't need a h

he just makes up her own courses  He'd do it if I had a tennis ball in my hand 

run falls to piece  I'd Q all the time too if I ran a breed that was born with drive and f

 He stresses out when he thinks he made a mistake  She just wasn't listening to

el like I'm dragging her around the course  She bailed off all her contacts again 

much fun for herself  You should see how fast he is when there's a squirrel in the

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