



Raising A Well-Rounded Puppy

Puppy Classes

We highly recommend enrolling your puppy in puppy classes at a local training facility. This is something I do with each of our keeper puppies despite having years of experience in obedience training. The classes are a great refresher for the experienced or a great learning opportunity for new handlers in the home (children included). Your puppy will get to socialize with other puppies of the same age and immune status, you will learn what proper puppy play looks like, your dog's social cues when they are not participating appropriately, and their cues when they have had enough. Aside from creating a solid foundation for training basics, puppy classes are a great opportunity to pick your trainers brain about any questions you may have regarding crate training, play biting, potty training etc.

Safely Exercising your Puppy

Properly exercising your puppy can ensure they receive enough physical activity without compromising their joints. Over working your Labradors can greatly increase their risk for muscle/joint issues as they age (including hip and elbow dysplasia). Here are a few rules we live by to ensure we aren't overworking our dogs.

Just because they can, doesn't mean they should.

Labradors are a sporting breed with an incredibly strong desire to work. During their growth and development, it's important for owners to ensure they don't overexert themselves. Just because your puppy can walk 5km, doesn't mean it should. Protect their joints now and they'll be mobile long into their senior years.

5 minutes of on leash walking per month of age (starting at 2 months) up to twice a day.

E.g., 8-week-old puppy = ten-minute walk x2 per day, 3-month-old puppy = 15-minute walk x2 per day.

Once they reach 6 months, the walks should max out at 30 minutes twice a day.

Once they reach 12 months, you can increase to 1 hour twice a day, but please monitor your dog closely for signs of exhaustion/disengagement.

Once they reach 6 months of age, off-leash walks can be introduced. Off-leash walks can be longer than 30 minutes if your dog is expressing interest in continuing the walk. When off-leash, the dog has the ability to pace itself. If you notice your dog slowing down, sticking closer to you, laying down, or excessively panting, the walk has been too long. Never exceed 5km off-leash until your dog is full grown (2-years).

Never run/bike on or off-leash with your puppy until 2 years of age. They'll want to keep up to you and overexert themselves.

At any age:

Playing outside in the yard for any amount of time is fine. The idea is that the dog has the ability to pace itself (contrary to when on-leash). If your puppy is expressing interest in the activities and is not showing signs of

exhaustion, you can continue. However, you should never purposely play your puppy to exhaustion. Sniffing, rolling, exploring, digging, and playing are all natural behaviours the dog can control itself. Playing fetch, walking on-leash, playing tug-of-war, or retrieving are all activities that the handler is controlling, therefore, the dog will continue the activity despite feeling overexerted. Labradors love to please and they will exhaust themselves in order to do so. The idea is to limit the amount of time doing handler led activities and encourage natural behaviours the dog can control itself.

Swimming is the best exercise your dog can get! We don't recommend playing fetch with your dog on ground until 2 years of age but fetch in the water is encouraged at all ages. Water is a great low impact exercise that will tire them out and encourage their natural retrieving instinct. Ensure your dog knows how to properly swim before doing any water activities.

If you are interested in using your dog for agility, do not jump your dog until 18-24 months of age.

Remember that 10 minutes of mental stimulation is equal to 30 minutes of physical play. The best way to tire your puppy out is by challenging their brain. It's more work for you, but you will end up with a tired and well-trained puppy!

As always, follow your veterinarian's advice regarding physical exercise. These are recommendations only and each puppy's development is different.

Socialization

Many owners believe puppy socialization means taking your dog to the dog park and playing with other dogs. What many seem to forget is that puppy play is just a small portion of proper socialization. We've done everything we can to properly socialize your puppy up to 8 weeks. It's now up to you to continue their socialization to form a well-rounded and socialized dog.

What is a well socialized dog? A well socialized dog is one that can obey its handler in any environment despite distractions while displaying confidence and relaxation in their behaviours. To properly socialize your dog, you need to expose them to as many environments as you can during their first year of life while consistently practicing basic obedience skills. Here's a few training opportunities we recommend:

8-16 weeks

- Visit pet friendly stores (Home Depot, Home Sense, Pet Stores, Canadian Tire, JYSK) with your puppy **in your arms or the shopping cart**. Encourage interactions from strangers and use treats to mark positive exchanges. Do not allow interactions with other dogs or place your puppy on the ground yet as their immune system is not ready.
- Go for short car rides often. Visit different environments such as school playgrounds, construction sites, drive thrus, or parks and allow your puppy to listen to the different sounds from the vehicle.
- Invite close family/friends to your home for short visits to get your puppy used to visitors in the home.
- Visit your veterinary office regularly for social visits. These condition your puppy to positive experiences with the clinic without the assumption that they will be poked by a needle or prodded by the vet. (Staff love puppy visits too!)
- Encourage your puppy to explore different surfaces. Ask them to climb onto a short stool or a rock in the backyard. Practice walking up and down stairs, over manholes, or fallen branches. This helps develop their tactile skills, muscles, and confidence.

4-12 months

- Continue visiting pet friendly stores with your puppy but now on leash. Practice basic obedience in the stores, quick and positive greetings with strangers, store workers and other dogs (if friendly). Don't be afraid to make your dog do weird things. I have our puppies climb on the Home Depot shopping carts and benches, introduce them to the talking witches at Canadian Tire during Halloween, climb into the Igloo dog houses at the pet store, and anything weird and new I can think of (be mindful of the stores merchandise and policies).
- Puppy play dates are highly encouraged with other puppies of the same age or well-trained adult dogs. Don't panic if an adult dog corrects your puppy if warranted. These are social cues your puppy needs to learn and practice responding too. Corrections from adult dogs are typically quick non-aggressive barks or snarls immediately followed by a relaxed state in the adult. They are short and non-harmful – something our mothers do while they are with us as pups. Aggressive behaviour is persistent and harmful. To learn about canine body language, click here: <https://www.akc.org/expert-advice/advice/how-to-read-dog-body-language/>
- Take your puppy anywhere and everywhere you physically can. Parades, fairs, soccer games, parks, trick-or-treating etc. The more you can expose them to while practicing obedience the better socialized they will be.
- Have a friend, family member, or neighbour come and watch your puppy for a short period of time while you are out of the house in addition to leaving your puppy in its crate for a couple hours at a time alone. Separation anxiety is hard to break, so it's best to start conditioning your puppy to being alone earlier vs later.
- Keep visiting your vet!

The ultimate socialization test:

If you can take your dog to a dog park and have them successfully perform basic obedience skills (relaxed and focused) outside the park fence while other dogs are playing, you have done well. **Do not try this without preparation** or before you have perfected basic obedience in public areas. It may take you years to get to this point and it should not be attempted if your pup is not prepared. Remi is now working on this at almost 4 years of age and Maple is nowhere near ready for this yet at 2 years old. If you push your pup too far too quickly you will go back steps in your training.

Socialization Don'ts

I don't ever recommend taking your dog to an event where there will be fireworks. They can be damaging to the dogs' ears and its extremely difficult to control the environment and ensure a positive experience. Further, some dogs despite being well socialized, will panic and run away. It's best to keep your dog inside during fireworks where they are safe and reward with their favourite treats for positive behaviour.

I also don't recommend dog parks. They are typically parasite infested areas with some good dogs and some bad dogs (bad owners). Its best to get together with a smaller group of dogs for playdates outside of the dog park in a more controlled area or at dog friendly walking trails. If you do attend dog parks, ensure you are always paying close attention to both you and the other dogs around you and can confidently identify concerning body language.

Crate Training

I am a huge fan of crate training for a few reasons:

1. Keeps your pup from chewing unwanted items when you are away
2. Provides them with a safe space to decompress or be alone when they desire
3. Promotes self-soothing and reduces likelihood of separation anxiety
4. Encourages routine

Here are a couple helpful resources to get you started with crate training. I recommend starting night one. It won't be easy at first, but with consistency you will get it, so don't give up! ☺

<https://www.akc.org/expert-advice/training/how-to-crate-train-your-dog-in-9-easy-steps/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C8cV2D1GGbg&t=192s>

Mental Stimulation

Brain games are the best way to tire out your pup and stimulate them mentally. Here are a few things we do with our dogs and a few resources to try something new:

1. Frozen Kongs – stuff your Kong with peanut butter or yogurt and kibble and freeze overnight
2. Lick mats – can be served frozen or fresh
3. Snuffle mats – a great alternative to the maze bowl food dish
4. Food dispenser toys
5. Food puzzles
6. Learn a new trick or practice old ones
7. Do an obstacle course or practice climbing random objects

<https://www.veterinarians.org/mental-stimulation-for-dogs/>

<https://longhaultrekkers.com/games-to-play-with-your-dog/>