



Training for Tinies--The Basics

Many people, even dog trainers will express dislike for the “little” dogs! Epithets like “yappy” or “nasty” or “not real dogs” are often used to describe them and it is often felt that they don’t need training or can’t be trained and it’s a waste of time to try. True, the small dogs come with a different set of problems and very definitely need a different approach but they are well worth the effort. They prove to be intelligent and good workers if they are handled correctly.

All owners of small dogs will find that they have special rules to follow. While it is usually not necessary to tell the Lab and Rottie owners that they are not allowed to pick their dogs up, **this is the most important rule for the owner of a little dog**. Unless it is an emergency, small dogs need to have their feet on the ground at all times! The next rule: small dogs should be treated like any other dogs instead of like animated accessories. Small dogs have the same instincts and ways of communicating as their larger canine counterparts and should be respected for those characteristics. They are not toys or babies and should not be treated as such.

Most small dogs have common problems. Many of these issues stem from living in what is essentially the “Land of the Giants” where everything is above their head and comes at them from strange heights and unexpected directions. They can be hand shy, people shy, noise shy or dog shy. They are often an intriguing combination of all of those. They are often defensive and act out aggressively. They can be hyper vigilant (which is why they are really great watchdogs!) and have short attention spans. They often have house training issues. All of these problems will need to be addressed.

We recommend that all small dogs wear a line when they are with their owners and it is imperative that small dogs **always** be warned before they are handled. Because they are small, people tend to grab them and scoop them up, especially if the handler feels the dog is in jeopardy or wants to move them quickly. We believe that this is a major reason that small dogs become fearful and aggressive. There they are, happily watching those ants crawling along the floor and wondering if they would make good snacks when suddenly, without warning they are airborne! Grabbed, sometimes painfully, around their ribs and then up through the air by a giant! It would be enough to make anyone dodge and yip!

The foundation for Tiny Training is the sit. The dogs learn to sit instantly and stay sitting. This allows the owner to control the dog at a distance and to approach without the dog skittering away. Owners learn that they must ask the dog to sit before any touching takes place. The line is there so that the dog can be controlled without the handler having to touch the dog. Once the dog is sitting, the owner approaches, pets and treats and then walks off. This lesson is repeated until the dog will sit anywhere in the room, no matter how far away from the owner.

At the same time that the Sit is being taught, the owners need to remember to let the dogs know what is going to happen before they pick them up. The command can be as simple as “Up”. The dog is first asked to sit, and then the handler goes to heel position, gives the command “Up” and reaches very deliberately for the dog, making sure the dog knows what is going to happen. The dog is then picked up gently but firmly with both hands so there is no painful grabbing. Once in the owner’s arms, the dog is praised, treated and then put back down. All handling is done as though this dog is a cross between a hamster and a spirited horse! Everything is careful, deliberate, firm and calm.

Once your little dog is sitting reliably and happy to be picked up, you can start regular obedience work--with some key adjustments.

Table Training

Teaching the littlest of dogs becomes much easier if you don’t have to bend way down to get to their level. Put your little one up on a sturdy table. Picnic tables work very well. Making sure that the dog is on a lead and being careful not to let them jump/fall off, you can now comfortably train without all the bending. Training on a table also helps the dog focus on the owner since they are removed from their comfort zone.

Once on the table, you can use food lures or positioning to teach basic commands like Down, Stay and Come. In addition, do basic “maintenance” and handling while the dog is on the table. Teach them to allow all the routine things that a groomer or vet will do during a grooming session or exam. Handle them all over, check teeth, nails and ears.

Nail Trimming

Nail trimming is often a huge issue for small dogs. It is often one of the things that owners will say they have the most trouble doing and will often make a special vet or groomer appointment just to have it done. The problem is that the dogs have not been taught to allow basic restraint and handling of their feet and the nail trimming is often done with the wrong tools and turns into a frightening and painful experience. It doesn't need to be that way.

Start early and slowly when teaching your small dog to allow nail trimming. Start by handling the feet while the dog is relaxed. Take each foot and gently massage it, putting a bit of pressure on each nail. Once your dog has no problems with allowing you to touch and handle his feet you can start by clipping one or two nails at a time. Learn how to cut the nails safely and without pain to the dog. Often the vet or groomer will want to give you your "money's worth" by cutting the nails short. This is almost always a mistake. Cutting nails short may cause pain and discomfort and it doesn't take more than one bad experience to turn the nail grooming sessions into real battles. A nail grinder for home use may be worth the investment. They are easier on the dog and the owner and generally will not cause pain. You will have to accustom the dog to the noise and feel of the grinder. You can also request that the groomer or vet use a grinder instead of a nail cutting tool if you take your dog in for grooming or nail trim. If you start desensitizing your dog to nail trimming when your dog is a puppy, you should not have any trouble. If you decide not to use a nail grinder there are many nail trimmers on the market but many of them are too cumbersome for a very small dog. For these dogs a nail trimmer made for cats may be the best choice or you may be able to use a nail clipper made for humans as long as you turn it sideways to fit the dog's nail. When using any type of clipper make sure to position it by looking behind where the blade will cut to make sure that it isn't going to cut the nail too short.

House Training

Many of the small breeds are difficult to house train. This problem could be helped immensely if breeders of these small breeds would change how they are housed. Unfortunately, getting information out to breeders is very difficult.

Small breed puppies can be easily trained to use "pee pads" or a litter box and this is a great place to start. A puppy which is trained to use pads or a litter box can be easily transitioned to outdoors but will always have an option if the weather is bad or they have to be confined inside for long periods of time.

During house training, your puppy may need to be taken outside every 15-30 minutes while he/she is awake. Take your puppy outside immediately after a play session, after meals and after naps. If you cannot watch your puppy put him/her in a playpen with access to a "potty place" or in a crate. Crate training is easy and essential for all dogs. The crate needs to be small. The dog should have room to stand up, turn around and lay back down and not much more. This is a bed, NOT a bedroom. Bedding in the crate should be something the puppy will not associate with a place to relieve themselves. It's important to know how your puppy was housed before you got him/her. If the breeder kept them in a pen lined with old bedsheets, don't use bedsheets in the crate! Many breeders of small breeds use towels or bedsheets in the whelping pens and the puppies develop a preference for using these surfaces.

At first crates should only be used at night or for short periods of time when you know the puppy will not have to relieve itself. You do not want the puppy to think that it's OK to dirty the crate. If this does happen, clean the crate with an enzyme cleaner and put in clean bedding. Never let the puppy get used to a dirty crate.

House training for some small dogs can take months so be patient, persistent and prepared for the long haul.

Small dogs are wonderful companions! They are portable, fun, smart, generally healthy and long lived. They are not toys or fashion accessories and deserve respect. They have the right to be treated like dogs and you and your small dog will live much happier, healthier lives if you remember that "inside of every small dog beats the heart of a large dog"!!

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Sept 2013