

Trudi Thorpe runs dogLOGIC Dog Training based in Sydney and specialises in Individual Behavioural Strategies, Puppy Pre-School and Adult Dog Classes. She is an AABP Professional Dog Trainer, Accredited Delta CGC Instructor, Accredited Delta CGC Assessor and a Certified Dog Behavioural Trainer. She is a member of the Delta Professional Dog Trainers Association, The Association of Animal Behaviour Professionals and the Association of Pet Dog Trainers.
 Email: trudi@doglogic.com.au Phone: 9591 1886 Mobile: 0419 999 975
 Ask Trudi a question regarding behaviour by emailing behaviour@urbananimal.net



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Hi Trudi,

We have a 18 week old German Shorthaired Pointer puppy called Molly that our family have been thoroughly enjoying since we brought her home. We all have a hand in her training which my 8 year old son and my 6 year old daughter really love. My husband and I both had dogs when we were growing up, but this is the first dog we have had as adults and we want to get her training right. She is pretty good at the basics like sit and drop and up until now has been really keen to learn however just recently we have experienced a major setback in her training. A couple of the more difficult things that we were dealing with were her barking at the kids at dinner time as they ate their dinner (they've admitted to feeding her when I'm not looking) and her constant mouthing both of the kids and us. We have tried a whole range of things to stop her such as shouting or putting her outside but have had little or no success. This week, someone from my husbands work suggested that we sound an air-horn whenever she exhibited either of those behaviours as a scare tactic so she would stop immediately. I wasn't sure, but we were at our wits end and at this point, were willing to give anything a go. It didn't go well! My husband only did it once and she got such a fright that she took off and now wont come anywhere near him. I am very concerned and I wondered if you could advise us of what to do.

Thank you,
Lorraine

Hi Lorraine,

There are a couple of different things going on here that we need to identify and modify - the most important thing to identify is that puppies are just puppies doing puppy things! They are going to throw a whole lot of different behaviours at you, some you will like and some you won't. It is up to you to shape and mould those behaviours so that Molly understands what's acceptable and what's not. Puppies are also very impressionable at that age and will respond accordingly. Using aversive methods of training (like an air-horn) can be enormously confusing to her and doesn't guarantee that she is correctly interpreting what it is that you want her to learn. It may also have long lasting consequences such as fear and uncertainty toward not only the person who sounded it but also anyone else that was around at the time. Positive reinforcement is a lot more effective in training as it teaches Molly what you DO want her to do.

The barking at the dinner table is attention seeking behaviour that has been reinforced by the kids feeding her. This is a great example of positive reinforcement and just how quick and effective it is for behaviours that we like but also behaviours that we DON'T like! Dogs are opportunists, so if a behaviour works for them, they will repeat that behaviour, so she barks, kids feed her so she does it again and they feed her again until it gets to a stage where she is barking constantly at them as they eat. I suggest that you separate them before they start eating, either put her outside where she can't see them or pop her in a time-out spot for the duration of the kids dinner. It should be noted that a time-out spot is not a 'bad' or 'naughty' place, it is simply somewhere to put Molly when YOU need a time-out! It should be a happy place, so maybe a baby gate across the laundry or the bathroom, or even a puppy pen where she can go and either enjoy her own dinner or chew on a bone or a pigs ear to keep her occupied. Not allowing her the opportunity to rehearse any unwanted behaviour will greatly assist in diminishing that behaviour over time.

The mouthing is natural puppy behaviour. ALL puppies' mouth! They don't have hands to grab onto you with, so they use their mouths. This behaviour generally stops at around 6 months of age but up until then it needs to be managed. One method you can use is to wait until Molly's teeth are on you and then let out a little squeak. This is what litter mates do with each other to learn what's called 'bite inhibition'. Most puppies will pull back immediately and when she does, you may resume play. Another way to distract Molly from mouthing you is to grab a toy and play with her - if she's on the end of toy, she's not on the end of you. Get a ball and roll it slowly along the floor. Puppies are very attracted to movement and if she's going after a ball, she's not going after you. If you just don't have time to play with her because you are trying to get ready for work or you are trying to get the kids off to school, put her in her special spot with something to do to occupy her. Boxes are a great source of entertainment to puppies, they love to rip and chew them so give her the insides of toilet rolls and empty tissue boxes along with maybe some chew toys or a bone. When the kids do interact with her get them to play calm games with her and avoid racing around the house with her barrelling after them. It won't be long before she has moved onto the next development stage and the mouthing stops.

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