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Raising Puppies to Be Brave: The Top 10 Ways to Create Confident Dogs

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Breeders and owners can do



Our pups led the way on last weekend's puppy walk.

many things when raising puppies to be confident, stable adults.

Last weekend was our Puppy Walk. Our 7-week old puppies enjoyed a 45-minute walk in the woods with 35 new friends. Many of the visitors, even long-time dog trainers, were amazed at how confident the pups were as they tackled rock walls, fallen logs, crowds of people, steep slopes, the stream and more. Our Puppy Walk is just one of our many challenges for raising puppies to be confident dogs.

Confidence, self-assurance and composure are characteristics most of us want in our dogs. These dogs handle the craziness of daily life with aplomb. They are often called stable and bomb proof in the face of distractions and frights. They are dogs that trust their own abilities and judgment, as well as their owners'. They are not needy, unstable nor fearful.

Most people thrive with confident dogs, especially working and performance homes. Search and rescue, guide and service dogs do best when they trust themselves and their training. Competition dogs succeed when they know their job and believe they can do it. And stable, bomb-proof pets are, well, fabulous. We use both nature and nurture to develop self-confidence in our puppies.

Here are the top TEN ways for raising puppies to be confident dogs!

1. Pick Self-Confident Parents. Breeding stock selection is key. Fearful dogs, both fathers and mothers, may pass their fears on to their offspring. Conversely, confident parents tend to produce more confident puppies BUT confident dogs are as much made as born so read on for things you can do to help your puppies become stable, confident dogs.

Read [*Might Dog Dads Contribute More Than DNA?*](#)

2. Pick Good Mothers. Nurture also plays a big role, starting with mothering. There is

strong evidence that attentive, doting mothers raise more confident offspring, even if those babies' natural mothers were timid. The reverse is also true. Poor moms that ignore or worse correct their pups too harshly can reduce the confidence of inherently bold puppies.



Good moms contribute tremendously to raising confident puppies.

3. Handle Your Puppies. Touching and holding puppies from very early in the pups' lives, particularly in the first three weeks, improves their ability to handle stress, learn and problem solve as adults. You can do this in formal ways, like Early Neurologic Stimulation and Early Scent Introduction, or you can just cuddle with each puppy every day. It's a tough job but someone has to do it!

Watch [our Early Scent Introduction webinar](#)

4. Send Pups Home at 8 Weeks or Later. Sending puppies home too early, say at 6 weeks rather than 8, increases the chance that they will be fearful and reactive as adults. This holds true even if the litter has been taken away from their mother. Simply staying with their littermates helps build self-confident dogs.



Leaving puppies with their littermates till at least 8 weeks increases their confidence as adults.

For some reason, many performance breeders and owners still think puppies should go home at 49 days. This misinterpretation of John Paul Scott and John Fuller's research has been refuted regularly by behaviorists. I think Dr. Ed Bailey gave the best explanation for why the 49-Day Rule is a myth not a rule.

Read [Dr Ed Bailey's article](#)

5. Present Pups with Appropriate Challenges. Some folks believe that baby puppies should be shielded from any fright or challenge that might stress them. We believe the opposite, although we obviously do not allow our puppies to get injured or terrified. However,

we know that to gain self-confidence, puppies must do things that are hard for them, that take them out of their comfort zone.

Puppy equipment that is too easy for the puppies after 4 or 5 weeks of age (the Transition Period) is cute but not developmental. Watching a 7-week old Lab puppy on a 1" high teeter or a German shepherd puppy on 4" dog walk may be fun but it isn't doing anything for the pups because there is no challenge.

By six weeks of age, puppies need situations that are physically and mentally difficult and a little bit stressful. Pups need to struggle to gain confidence, whether getting on a platform, sliding down a slide or wading in a stream. A pup may have to try a dozen times, perhaps over several days, to climb up on a platform. He may whine, cry and even howl. He may give up or fail, over and over. Yes, he will get stressed and it will be hard on him. BUT if we allow the puppy to solve the problem himself, he will become more coordinated and confident. If we make it too easy or if we rescue him, he will not. Independent success and achievement create self-confident puppies.



By six weeks, pups should be presented with real physical and mental challenges

Our Adventure Box is an example of a challenge. We don't hang stuffed animals from our boxes. Instead, we have clanging paint cans, and large plastic cups that bop puppies as they go by. We intersperse soft paint brushes with heavy chains so as the pups bite the brushes, the chains hit them. It is made to be noisy and slightly stressful while still being very, very safe.

[See videos of pups in their Adventure Boxes](#)

6. Change Things Regularly. Because of the way dogs develop, challenges need to change regularly, too. Puppies habituate to things very quickly and when they do, development stops. So change up your puppy pen, moving items around and rotating things in and out. When you walk your pups, go in different directions each day. If your pups are doing everything with ease, make them a little more difficult.
7. Take Woods Walks with Your Litters.

We call them woods walks but you can call them field or beach or even desert walks. Taking your puppies out for off-leash walks over moderate terrain not only helps them develop confidence but it significantly reduces the risk of hip dysplasia in adulthood. If you can, get off the path and go cross country with your pups so they meet and overcome challenges like ditches, hills, fallen trees, stone walls and more.



A bulldog puppy learning to negotiate obstacles in the woods.

All breeds can do woods walks; you'll simply make the challenges smaller for toy breeds. Make sure it's not too hot or too cold, and that your "woods" are free of other dogs. Use your yard, your friend's yards or those hidden wild places. Where not to go? Never a dog park or the local dog hangout.

[See what a woods walk with 13 puppies looks like!](#)

8. Recognize That Wariness is Normal. There seems to be a new philosophy that if pups are afraid of something, people should get involved to help them. The vast majority of the time, nothing could be further from the truth! In all but emergencies, our involvement reduces the puppies' self-efficacy and instead, changes them from independent problem solvers to dependent ones. If producing confident dogs is our goal, we want to give puppies the opportunity to deal with their own concerns.

Starting at 5 weeks of age, it is natural for pups to be wary of new objects, people and places. Wariness is not fear! Wariness is being cautious about possible dangers or problems. Puppies go from being completely unaware of things that can hurt them at 3 and 4 weeks of age to recognizing that there are dangers in the world. Between 5 and 9 weeks of age, pups become hyperaware of novel items because they now have the mental ability to assess whether a situation is safe or not.

Pups at this age develop at different rates so you



may see some pups showing caution earlier than others. That's just because their brains and nervous systems are maturing at different times.

Wariness is normal in puppies after 5 weeks of age!

What appears to be a slow or even fearful puppy may just be a pup whose brain needs to finish up myelination, a key step that enables learning.

When these older puppies come upon a new thing, they might move to a safer distance to observe and smell the item. They might circle it to see what happens and then approach cautiously to touch and sniff the new thing. All of this is not only normal, it is SMART!

9. **Avoid Labeling Young Puppies.** If we label a 6-week old (or worse yet, younger) puppy as "fearful" or "manipulative" simply because it is wary around a new object, we have made a serious error. What the puppy is doing is normal for its age. The difference between it and others in its litter might be due to physiologic rather than temperament. Like people, dogs develop at different rates. Since we are talking about puppies that haven't even been alive for two months yet, giving them the benefit of the doubt seems appropriate.

Psychologists have long known that labeling children affects how others treat them. Once we label puppies, we look for evidence to support that label, even if it isn't there. We want to be unbiased but we are not once we have labeled a puppy. We watch "stars" and ooh and ah over the great things they do, overlooking their moments of tentativeness. Once a puppy has been labeled a "weanie" or "scaredy-cat," we treat that puppy differently.

We compound our error if we then step in to "fix" the fearful puppy by interfering with the natural process by which puppies learn about themselves and their world. Instead, we should quietly and unobtrusively support ALL puppies in the 6- to 13-week period. We should give all of them as much time and experience they need to become comfortable with the strange things they find in the world around them.

10. **Allow Pups to Solve Their Own Problems.** So what should we do if our puppy is afraid? We should wait quietly, giving the puppy time to complete its evaluation and make a decision regarding the novel item. Often, we just put the item in the pen with the litter so it has all the time it needs to resolve its concern. This also allows it to watch its littermates or mother interact with the item.



Letting pups solve their own problems, as long as they are safe, builds their confidence.

If we can't put the object in the pen, we stay quietly out of the way while ensuring the puppy is safe. We might support the puppy by sitting or standing nearby but we do not take control of the situation. This is between the puppy and its world! If we encourage the puppy, we are putting pressure on it, increasing the stress it is feeling. If we push, pull or physically place the puppy near the item, we may cause it to panic. If we start training, we teach the puppy that we are in charge in strange situations rather than him. We are making him dependent and needy. Remember, our job is to do nothing but ensure the puppy is safe and offer him the comfort of our presence!

If the puppy is still concerned about the item after 15 minutes, we will plan a return trip, perhaps with a confident older dog. Puppies learn a lot by observing older dogs so we use them to help puppies gain confidence. For this reason, we also never allow puppies to walk with fearful adult dogs since the older dog's concern may rub off on the pup.

In all walks of life, confident dogs do best. Raising confident dogs is critical for today's breeders and owners. To do this, we select stable breeding animals, keep the pups till 8 week or later, and create challenging developmental opportunities in which we allow puppies to solve their own problems. We recognize that puppies from 5 to 12 weeks are programmed to respond warily to the world, evaluate what is dangerous, and then engage with perceived safe items, people and situations. As owners and breeders, our job is to not interfere or take control during this time or we risk creating dependent rather than confident pups! Instead, we should ensure developmental opportunities are age and size appropriate and a bit of a challenge. We then make sure the puppies are safe and stay out of the way.

Your homework: What baby step can you take to help your puppies become more confident? Woods walks? Adventure Boxes? Problem solving games? Share your ideas in the comments below.

P.S. If you think raising confident puppies is important, please share this blog with other dog lovers.

Gayle Watkins, Ph.D. has been breeding golden retrievers under the Gaylan's kennel prefix for 35 years. She has bred over 60 American and Canadian conformation, obedience, agility and tracking champions, as well as master hunters, qualified-all age dogs and wonderful hunting dogs and pets. Through Avidog, she shares her breeding, puppy rearing and puppy evaluation methods with breeders of all kinds.

Resources

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