

Assistance Dogs Europe

Guidance Note on Dog Training

Introduction

Assistance Dogs Europe (ADEu) is an umbrella organisation for assistance dog organisations across Europe. To become a member of ADEu, organisations must meet the agreed standards. The aim of these standards is to ensure that the highest possible level of welfare is in place for all assistance dogs and, using the status attached to assistance dogs, to encourage responsible dog ownership amongst the general public. These guidelines are designed to advise members of ADEu on the key elements to be considered in relation to the welfare of the dogs involved in order to meet these standards.

The worksheet is divided into three areas: age and development, breed type and training methods.

1. Age and Development

The early development of the dog can be divided into four distinct phases: the neonatal period, the transition period, the socialisation period and the juvenile period*. During these four phases are critical stages in which environmental influences can have either a negative or positive effect on a dog's temperament as an adult.

The socialisation period starts during the puppy's fourth week and continues to the age of about eight to ten weeks*. During this time puppies learn to interact with littermates, and at the age of eight weeks start to show avoidance behaviour to aversive stimuli.

Within the socialisation period there is a 'critical period' which is the age range during which certain events are likely to have long-term effects on a dog's development. After this period the dog gradually develops a lower sensitivity to such events*. Following the socialisation period is the juvenile period which lasts until the dog reaches sexual maturity, the age of which varies between breeds* (McCune, McPherson & Bradshaw, 1995).

Many organisations work with volunteer puppy walkers. Volunteers are responsible for looking after the puppy until they reach the age to enter their advanced training. Using a holistic approach, organisations can support volunteers, and therefore the puppy, by providing home visits, organised puppy classes and advice over the phone.

Puppy classes aim to assist a dog's development during the socialisation period by exposing him to 'challenging environments in a controlled and supportive way' (Coape, 2009). A well-run puppy class will help to develop a dog's intra-specific communication, encourage socialisation with people and children, habituation with everyday objects,

prevent future behaviour problems, and promote responsible dog ownership by encouraging training beyond a class situation (Coape, 2009).

2. Breed

Many breeds are trained to become assistance dogs. However, the most popular, and generally most successful breeds, come from the Retriever group. Whichever breed your organisation works with, staff should be given access to breed specific information allowing them to train the dog effectively.

Each breed type has different requirements and abilities. Puppy and advanced training programmes should be developed to consider, where possible, breed specific behaviours. For example, the Labrador Retriever has been bred to retrieve. By teaching a toy retrieve we are developing a tool that can be used within the rewards system of the training programme while allowing the Labrador to perform one of his innate behaviours.

Due to the different ages of maturity within breed types, the age at which a dog enters his advanced training should also be carefully considered. For example, the Retriever group will generally mature at a slower rate than some other breed types and would therefore, potentially, be ready to enter advanced training later than some other breed types.

3. Training methods

Dog training is based on an understanding of learning theory i.e. how a dog learns. Operational staff should have access to information on the basic principles of learning theory in order to apply these methods in their everyday work.

Positive Reinforcement ^(R+)

“A positive reinforcer is a stimulus that, when presented following a behaviour, makes it more likely that type of behaviour will occur in the future” (Burch & Bailey 1999:31).

Table 1: Positive Reinforcement

Positive (something added)	Reinforcement (behaviour increases)	Positive reinforcement (something added increases behaviour)
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The term ‘positive’ refers to something being given, and the term ‘reinforcement’ refers to the fact that this encourages the behaviour to be repeated (Burch & Bailey, 1999). Positive reinforcers will vary in significance depending on an animal’s motivators ordinarily, and at the time of reinforcement i.e. what is reinforcing for one dog may be

of little importance to another (a dog that has just been fed will potentially place a lower value on a food reinforcer than a dog that has not yet eaten) (Coape, 2009).

Negative Punishment (P⁻)

“Negative punishment involves the withdrawal of a positive consequence” (Burch & Bailey 1999:61).

Table 2: Negative Punishment

Negative (something taken away)	Punishment (behaviour decreases)	Negative punishment (something taken away decreases behaviour)
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The term ‘negative’ refers to something being taken away and the term ‘punishment’ refers to the fact that this discourages the behaviour from being repeated (Burch & Bailey, 1999).

ADEu promotes the use of positive reinforcement and negative punishment within organisations.

Consistency is also an important area to a training programme. The unexpected changing of expectations and/or criteria in any area of dog training can cause unnecessary stress. For example, it is important that a dog’s training records are kept up to date to provide information to a new or covering trainer when sick or annual leave is taken.

Summary

There are many areas that will influence a dog’s ability to learn. A holistic approach incorporating age, breed specifics and training methods while ensuring that welfare requirements are met, enables dogs to learn effectively. The provision of flexibility within a training programme will also allow for individual dogs to be given more or less training time if necessary.

Preparing a dog for life as an assistance dog is one of the most important elements of any training programme. By effectively socialising and habituating dogs to every-day situations in a positive and effective way, during and beyond the socialisation and critical period, we can enhance their development into well socialised, confident dogs which is key for a successful client/assistance dog relationship.