



Guide Dogs for the Blind

Dog to Dog Interaction

One of the reasons a promising puppy may be dropped from the Guide Dog program is dog distraction. Some puppies are inherently more interested in other canines. Other puppies, allowed too much interaction with dogs, associate all dogs with fun and play. This association is counter-productive for a working dog coping with the challenges of loose dogs. A guide may encounter numerous invitations to greet or play with dogs in the environment daily.

The most effective way to deal with dog distraction is to prevent it by using positive reinforcement techniques. The Ground Tether, Hand Tether, Food Rewards for Distraction and Loose Leash Walking are all valuable tools in teaching a puppy to ignore other dogs and in creating a higher value in the handler in the presence of other dogs. By utilizing these exercises around other dogs, both in the home and in public, the puppy will learn to focus on his work in preference to engaging another dog.

Puppies that are not fully vaccinated should not be exposed to unknown dogs and should avoid high traffic dog areas. Appropriate behavior around other dogs can still be practiced at home and at puppy club meetings.

In the Home

Our puppies need to learn from a young age to settle around other dogs. We want GDB puppies to focus on interacting with people and build stimulus control. Having another dog in the household can be a great way for a puppy to learn self-control around dogs. We need to encourage the pup to appropriately “hang out” with the family dog (with a family member present; pups should never be left unattended with another dog) and to resist the temptation to engage in active play.

If the puppy is over-interested in engaging the family dog, he should be worked on the food reward games consistently in the presence of the other dog. If the pet dog cannot ignore the puppy, it may need to be tethered or otherwise restrained while the puppy is being trained. Raisers should always have kibble readily available to reward the puppy for resisting engagement with the pet dog. Pets who constantly engage the GDB puppy should be kept separated from the puppy.

Guide dog puppies should not be allowed to pester pet dogs. If the pet dog is too good-natured to defend itself, the raiser should step in and re-direct the puppy.

“Hanging out” can be defined as settling quietly in the same room, perhaps with a toy, without racing around or pestering the pet dog to play. Gentle mouth-to-mouth interactions (usually while lying down), limited social grooming and trading toys can be acceptable interactions so long as the intensity doesn’t increase. Racing around, rough and tumble and even gentle wrestling-type play should be discouraged. Ideally, the dogs should be ignoring each other the majority of the time.

When interactions start to ramp up it’s a good time for the handler to employ the “That’s Enough” cue and encourage the dogs to resume settling. Sometimes it may be necessary to separate the dogs to control the energy level.

Active play times should be supervised and limited to a few minutes and preferably not on a daily basis. Active play should never be allowed inside the home but kept to an outdoor, fenced area. The raiser should be present and ready to intervene should the play start to build in intensity. Dogs should not be left to play unsupervised. Allowing more than two dogs in the play session increases the risk of the interaction escalating and also risks injury to the puppy. Good tempered, mature dogs are more appropriate playmates than other

puppies. Puppies learn appropriate interactions from adult dogs and an adult dog can be more easily redirected if the situation becomes too rough.

Defining active play is difficult as it can be very different depending on the players! Two dogs in a yard engaging in exploring together, loping around and gentle, relaxed games of doggie chase may be acceptable between suitably matched dogs. High speed racing around, physical wrestling and “drive by” type ambushes are not appropriate forms of play for guide dog puppies. Play should not be allowed to increase in intensity to the point where the puppy is unaware of its handler. Frequent recalls for food rewards and time spent “decompressing” on leash, with food rewards for calm behavior, are good ways to maintain a level of control during playtimes.

Obsessions with other dogs can be created if the puppy is left in a pen for long periods where it can see other dogs running and playing. A similar situation can occur in a raiser's fenced yard with a neighbor's dog being the distraction. Fence running and fence fighting may promote aggressive behavior.

Developing puppies will mimic the behavior of dogs that they live with. If a guide dog puppy sees a pet dog growling and barking at other dogs it may copy that behavior.

At Puppy Meetings

Letting GDB puppies greet each other and play at meetings teaches the pup to expect interaction and discourages focus on its handler. It is alright for the puppies to visit briefly once in a while, but only with the handlers' permission and after the pup shows full engagement with its handler. The puppy must show self-control to earn the privilege of visiting after it has settled down at the meeting. Raisers should not let the puppy visit other pups at every meeting; it's not necessary and encourages distractibility. Letting the pups greet each other regularly, even after settling down, creates an expectation in the puppy which could lead to keying on the other puppies. It could also lead to patterning the behavior of remaining calm then unexpectedly lunging toward another dog.

Raisers should practice the tethering games and as the puppy matures, Loose Leash Walking at meetings. A higher rate of reinforcement than is used at home will keep the puppy engaged in the game. If the puppy is having a hard time settling at a meeting, it should be taken to a quiet corner and given food rewards for calm behavior.

A working guide will inevitably come into contact with dogs of all shapes and sizes. We want our puppies to be comfortable around different types of dogs. Exposing GDB puppies to non-GDB breeds is beneficial but the other dogs should be calm and non-reactive. An ideal way to practice Loose Leash Walking and distraction proofing around different dogs, is to have leaders arrange some club meetings with appropriate pet dogs present. Alternately, the raiser can practice the games of Ground Tether and Hand Tether with friends' dogs that are under control.

In Public

Raisers should avoid out-of-control dogs in the neighborhood and gain control of their own pup by practicing Food Rewards for Distractions and Loose Leash Walking games. It may be necessary to practice at a great distance from the other dog initially, to give the puppy an opportunity to be successful. A high rate of reinforcement will be necessary at first.

A young puppy who is shy of other dogs or has been traumatized by a bad experience will gain confidence if the other dog is lying down. It is important that the pup is not forced to socialize but receives lots of positive reinforcement from its raiser for accepting the presence of the other dog. The other dog may have to be kept a good distance away initially, while the puppy is rewarded for calm behavior. Once the pup is comfortable, it can be encouraged to visit with the mentor dog but only on the puppy's terms. Sometimes it may take several weeks of positive reinforcement (food rewards from the handler) before the puppy is comfortable enough to allow the presence of another dog close by.

Occasionally a raiser will find himself in a tight space with no way to avoid leashed dogs, such as at a vet's office or on a crowded sidewalk. This would be a good time to utilize the “Emergency Lure” technique to focus the puppy's attention fully on the food as the dogs are passed by. This is not a technique for every day; such

situations should be avoided whenever possible. The Emergency Lure is very useful to prevent the puppy from engaging with other dogs in close quarters but is not a training technique; if a raiser is utilizing this technique on a regular basis, the puppy's socialization schedule needs to be reconsidered.

See document and video on "Emergency Lure"

Loose Dogs

Raisers should stay alert when walking their puppy and change direction if a loose dog is seen. Sometimes running into a loose dog is unavoidable. If this happens the handler's reaction can help or aggravate the situation. Often the loose dog can be persuaded to go home by the raiser bending to pick up some pebbles - any street-wise mutt knows what is coming next! If, however, the raiser is taken by surprise and cannot escape the situation, the best thing to do is encourage the guide pup to relax and be friendly. Yelling at the stray may incite the puppy to join in and teaches him to be aggressive to off-leash dogs. Tightening the pup's leash telegraphs tension; making him feel trapped and defensive. Struggling to make the pup stay may cause the loose dog to "help" you discipline the puppy! If the handler relaxes the leash, says "OK" and chats confidently, the dogs will relax too. Most dogs will give the pup a good sniff then leave.

Tip: Throwing a handful of kibble on the ground for the loose dog to eat will often distract it long enough that you can escape!

A guide dog puppy may become defensive toward other dogs if it inadvertently has a bad experience. A pup that has been "jumped" by another dog should be socialized very carefully thereafter to help gain its confidence. Once again the placid, non-threatening pet dog is the ideal socializer.

The raiser should avoid routes where loose dogs frequent and/or enlist the help of the dogs' owner and perhaps the local Animal Control.

A guide dog puppy going into formal training ideally is comfortable in the presence of all types of dogs without being overly interested in them. If you feel your puppy is not receiving sufficient exposure to other dogs speak to your leader and/or CFR for suggestions for further socialization opportunities.