



Guide Dogs for the Blind

Puppy Raising Department

Modifying Inappropriate Behavior

Removal of Reinforcement & Corrections

Raisers should review the document “Puppy Raising R+ Training Philosophy” and the accompanying graphic “Roadmap of Reinforcement” for an overview of the place of corrections in our training philosophy.

At Guide Dogs for the Blind we teach puppies appropriate behavior utilizing reward-based training methods and by managing the environment to make it easy for the puppy to make appropriate choices. All skills are taught using positive methods; corrective training techniques are not appropriate when teaching a puppy new skills, even if a puppy is not progressing as quickly as expected. However, there may be times during a puppy’s raising that inappropriate behaviors arise and need to be stopped immediately with a correction, either for puppy or raiser safety, or because the behavior itself is rewarding and other methods have been ineffective in curbing the behavior. Some inappropriate behaviors are self-reinforcing for the puppy and can quickly become habits which are then more difficult to change. The raiser stepping in with a timely correction may be necessary to prevent bad habits forming.

We have three approaches to modifying inappropriate behavior (these are described in more detail in the “Philosophy” document):

- Rewarding Alternative Behavior (using R+ or positive reinforcement)
- Removing Reinforcement (P- or negative punishment)
- Correction (P+ or positive punishment)

In this document we are going to focus on the latter two and give examples of situations a raiser might use either P- or P+.

Removing Reinforcement

For removing reinforcement to work as a technique to stop undesirable behavior, there has to be something that the puppy really desires, so that the removal of that thing is an effective punishment. For example, a puppy accidentally mouths the raiser when playing tug with a toy. As soon as this happens, the toy is removed and the game stops. As long as this consequence is consistently applied, the puppy learns that mouthing the raiser will result in removal of the thing that the puppy wanted (playing tug) and will decrease the likelihood the puppy will mouth the raiser the next time they play tug.

A ‘time-out’ is another example of removing reinforcement and can be effective in dealing with any type of attention-seeking behavior. It is especially useful for young puppies that really desire human interaction and like to be close to their handler.

Situations where removal of what the pup desires may be effective are:

- Vocalizing in a crate or on tie-down
- Jumping, mouthing, general over-aroused behavior directed toward the handler or other household members
- Running/jumping on furniture and/or grabbing items in the home
- Inappropriate interactions with other pets

Examples of removing reinforcement:

- Removing attention by ignoring (no look, no talk, no touch!)

- Removing access to rewards (handler turns away in the middle of a training session indicating no rewards are available)
- End of game and removal of access to play (tug games, dog-dog play, etc.)
- Removing social interaction by walking out of the room and leaving the pup alone for a few minutes (if safe to do so)
- Removing freedom by placing the puppy in a crate or on a tie-down and ignoring/isolating for a few minutes. Putting the puppy in a crate has the added benefit of calming over-arousal as the puppy associates the crate with settling and relaxing. (Of course the puppy should continue to have many positive associations with the crate to ensure it remains comfortable being crated.)

Correction

A correction is applying an aversive to decrease the likelihood of a behavior happening again. Corrections should only be applied to change behavior in situations where alternative, less intrusive methods have been attempted without success. (See above.) Raisers should receive instruction in corrective techniques from leaders or CFRs. Communication between raisers and leaders should be ongoing for puppies needing corrective measures. The leader should keep the CFR apprised of the puppy's progress.

An effective correction should only need to be applied once or twice depending on the situation and the resilience of the puppy. If raisers find it necessary to apply corrections repeatedly to stop a behavior, this indicates a need to change the environment and/or review handling techniques. If a raiser is finding a need to apply aversives more than a few times per week, they should seek help from a leader/CFR.

Corrections should be the minimum that interrupts the unwanted behavior, allowing a quick return to positive, reward-based training techniques. Great consideration should be given before correcting more sensitive puppies even with a verbal correction, rather, these pups should be managed to avoid having to use aversive techniques.

Raisers should always be sensitive to public perception and handle puppies accordingly. Removing the puppy from the situation is sometimes the action of choice. Under no circumstances are multiple corrections warranted, especially in public. If a single correction is ineffective in stopping an unwanted behavior, the puppy should be removed from the situation, or moved to a greater distance where it can be rewarded for desirable behavior.

Approved correction techniques in the home:

- Verbal interrupter such as a sharp "Ay!" possibly accompanied by a hand clap
- Collar/leash correction
- Use of a dragline which can be grabbed to administer a collar correction
- Taste deterrent with CFR approval
- Environmental corrections with CFR approval (spray devices and Snappy Traps)

Approved correction techniques in public:

- Collar/leash correction on a flat collar

Corrections are never given on a head collar. Smoothly and gently redirecting the pup's attention back to the handler, enabling a return to positive techniques, is permissible.

Verbal interrupters should not be used in public situations due to the possibility of drawing negative public attention.

In no instance is it ever acceptable to correct a puppy by verbally intimidating, hitting, or kicking the puppy.

Puppy raisers should receive training from leaders/CFRs in how to give effective collar and leash corrections. A collar correction is a quick 'pop' of momentary contact on the dog's neck sufficient to interrupt the dog's behavior, but never so hard that the dog is physically relocated. To be effective, the leash must be loose before and immediately after the correction. Sometimes this means that the handler must push their hand

holding the leash toward the dog's collar quickly, just before snapping on the leash. Raisers should first practice the technique without a puppy, under leader supervision, until they have mastered the skill.

In conclusion, we reiterate that in Puppy Raising at Guide Dogs for the Blind, we maximize positive reinforcement techniques. If corrections need to be utilized to curb unwanted behavior they should be fair, timely and effective - allowing a prompt return to reward-based training.