



Guide Dogs for the Blind

Puppy Raising Department Ruff Notes – June 2017

Fear of Dogs and Dog Distraction

In the last month, we have had several dogs dropped from training due to fear of non-GDB dogs encountered on route. This is a sudden increase for this behavior. While this spike may be an anomaly, we want to make sure raisers are proactive about appropriately socializing puppies around many different breeds of dogs. Appropriate socialization also helps with dog distraction, which, as we all know, is a more frequent reason for career change. We would like to help raisers prevent dog distraction in our pups and ensure that our pups are comfortable around different breeds – including those little yappers!

As a reminder, here is what the “Final Goal Behaviors” document says about distraction:

Ideal: *Dog notices and demonstrates confidence over the presence of the distraction without notable emotional change and disregards the distraction quickly. Dog remains aware of handler cues, maintaining its current location, if stationary, or continuing past distraction when in motion.*

Acceptable: *Dog moves slightly towards distraction but is easily redirected verbally to remain with handler or continue on travel path past the distraction. Disregards the distraction after passing or after it has left.*

A GDB pup that pulls toward, lunges at, and/or vocalizes in the presence of other dogs is distracted. Even keying (staring) at other dogs or checking back repeatedly after passing another dog may be too much dog interest. Casually noticing other dogs is normal behavior.

A GDB pup that hackles, avoids, cowers, tail tucks or otherwise shows discomfort around other dogs needs help gaining confidence in their presence.

Two documents from the manual have a lot of information about dog interaction and preventing dog distraction:

The “Dog to Dog Interaction” document was revised last year:

<https://www.guidedogs.com/uploads/files/Puppy-Raising-Manual/Dog-to-Dog-Interaction.pdf>

This document on using R+ to counter-condition distractions was new last year:

<https://www.guidedogs.com/uploads/files/Puppy-Raising-Manual/Food-Rewards-for-Countering-Distractions.pdf>

Additional Tips

- Have raisers bring baby pups to meetings hungry, even missing the meal before the meeting, or use high-value food for less greedy puppies (check with CFR first) so that the pups are motivated to look to the raiser for food rewards, rather than to the other pups for entertainment.
- Ensure that raisers are providing a very high rate of reinforcement when young puppies are around other dogs. A cup of food in ten minutes of exposure is not too much for a four month old pup!

- Give young pups, or any puppies with dog-distraction issues, plenty of space at meetings, especially when passing in doorways etc. This is where the habit of lunging often begins. Have raisers utilize the “Emergency Lure” if tight spaces are unavoidable.
- Have raisers practice the tethering exercises and Paw Pad 2 with novel dog distractions as soon as the puppies have had their vaccinations. Invite pre-screened pet dogs belonging to raisers/friends/neighbors to meetings. Obviously such dogs should be vaccinated, parasite free and of a suitable temperament.
- Talk to local dog trainers/4H dog clubs/dog obedience and show clubs about visits or combined meetings now and then. Make sure all parties know the expectations ahead of time.
- Download files of dogs barking or make your own by stopping in at a shelter and recording the barking. Have raisers play the files very low volume while puppies are eating their meals and gradually up the volume over a period of days or weeks. Make new files of different barking dogs when the pup gets used to the first recording. This would be especially beneficial for pups who are worried about dogs barking behind fences.
- Build up the activity level of the distraction dog slowly. So along with considering the distance a GDB pup is from another dog, and the amount of time the pup is exposed, think about the level of distraction. At first the distraction dog might be just standing next to its owner, then walking around close to its handler, then trotting, then perhaps jumping up and down and eventually perhaps playing tug or barking. Each time the level of activity is raised the distance from the distraction should be increased initially to keep the GDB pup successful. Some pups may be ready for greater distraction than others; care must be taken in meetings to individualize the distraction to the pup.
- Set up “dog distraction” outings as in real life situations. This may mean planting a distractor dog and handler several blocks away with instructions to walk past the raiser and pup. Or the helper can sit at an outdoor café with the dog under a table to be brought out as the GDB pup walks by. Work the GDB puppies individually so that they don’t have the support and proximity of their puppy club buddies when encountering the “strange” dog.
- GDB puppies that don’t have a pet dog in their household should be given puppy sitting opportunities with other raisers to expose them to appropriate canine mentors. Some of the worst cases of dog distraction occur in dogs that have not learned to just “hang out” in the home with another dog.
- Play with another dog should be under the guidelines in the “Dog to Dog Interaction” document. It is good for puppies to learn social interaction with other dogs and they will learn best from adult dogs, not other puppies.
- Puppies that are nervous of dogs may be allowed to greet calm, gentle dogs in a carefully controlled way. Having the new dog lie down or sit and be neutral will give the pup confidence to approach and investigate. The mentor dog should always be of a known temperament to avoid the pup having a bad experience.

As you are all aware, our dogs are encountering other dogs in larger numbers in areas that were previously dog-free. Encounters with inappropriate “service dogs” and “emotional support” dogs are not uncommon in stores and businesses. If we can prepare our pups for these inevitable encounters through proper socialization and counter-conditioning, they will be able to keep their focus on their job once in harness.