

Clicker Training For Young Pups

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From week six to 10 is the ideal time to lay the foundation for your Dal's future as a family member. Your puppy is developing quickly and he's new to his environment. Hopefully he has had little or no opportunity to go off discovering unsupervised. Dalmatians tend to be lively puppies and after a short time in their new homes can become unmanageable. At five or six weeks, spending 10 minutes with each puppy, a breeder can train the entire litter in a week. Send each puppy into his new home with a clicker and established behaviors to help ensure his future as a great companion.

When you interact with your Dal puppy, always have something for him to do, otherwise you will soon become his chew object. Choose an area that has safe flooring and blocked off doorways. It is best if you sit on the floor, however you can work from a chair. Place your bag of treats (soft, small bits work best) on a chair or stool next to you. If the puppy is sleepy, take advantage of the opportunity to settle him in your lap. Place him tummy down, then gradually turn him on his back. Check his feet, ears, teeth etc. - make a thorough observation. This is the best time to cuddle your puppy.

Once he is awake and lively he will resent being restrained and, knowing you may have cuddle in mind, become difficult to carry or catch. When your puppy wakes up, take him out to potty or place him on the newspaper. Your puppy should be off leash for training, so pick up anything that will distract him. Using a clicker in one hand and a few treats in the other, begin by empowering the clicker with a series of quick, click - treat repetitions.

Now try luring. Keep your hand close to his nose, let him lick the treat but not eat it. For sit - raise your hand up and back. Down - hand on the floor, he will drop down to work the treat. Stand - move your hand forward then stop. Click and treat for each behavior. Make certain you click THEN treat. If the puppy is too lively and grabby, do several repetitions of the behavior series, just luring and treating. Mix up the order.

When he is working slower, after you click a behavior, move your treat hand quickly six inches from his mouth, return quickly and treat. If he continues to jump for the treat, gently push him back with your treat hand while he is eating. Look for him to hesitate when your hand moves (he now thinks he has misjudged the distance of his mouth to your hand), click the hesitation and quickly treat. Always click BEFORE you start back toward his mouth with the treat. Practice this after all behaviors, attempting to increase the time he will wait for the treat to return.

Now put the food in your non-luring hand, lure without the treat, click the behavior, be a little slow to retrieve the reward and feed him. Next, put all the food on the chair or low table near you so it is visible but out of puppy reach. Lure a behavior, click and reach for the treat. If he gets up when you reach for the treat, put it



Nan and a pup work together. Photo courtesy Nan Dittrick.

back, lure him into the behavior and repeat until he will wait for you to bring him the treat.

Impatient Dal puppies take several repetitions before showing any indication to wait. As soon as he hesitates, which he will do when he realizes moving isn't working, quickly grab the treat and get it to him immediately. He will learn that his waiting makes you move faster. This is a useful lesson for puppy. Try to address this issue in other contexts and reinforce. Examples: sitting rather than pawing, makes doors open. Waiting rather than jumping makes the food dish come closer.

Teach your Dal to chase his meals. The puppy's ability to focus is developing at this age. It is a perfect time to teach him this game. Take three or four dry kibbles from his food bowl. It helps to rattle them a little to get his attention. Now, using a slow gesture, let them slide about 6 inches in front of the puppy - closer if he is not watching.

Repeat until he knows the game well enough to trot several feet away to get the kibble. Dalmatians love this opportunity to chase after their meal and will hurry back for more. At this point, begin to structure the game. Before tossing more food, wait for the puppy to sit or lure him into down. He quickly realizes he can access the food by sitting or lying down and will do so on his own. Whenever he is especially keen to get back, use this opportunity to attach the word come to his rapid return.

Helpful Hints:

- * Reward anything cute.
- * Avoid petting your puppy during these early training sessions. He will think your strokes are an invitation for rough play - that is what they do with each other. A brief cuddle when you finish works best.
- * Wait until a behavior is 90% reliable before naming it "sit". Dogs pay more attention to what we do than what we say. If the word "sit" has no apparent connection to the consequence, getting a treat, the dog will ignore it. The consequence drives the behavior, not the command.
- * If you cannot think of what to do, you can always empower the clicker.
- * Remember at this age, that the sole purpose of the puppy body is to transport the puppy mouth. Their bodies learn quickly how to get food to the mouth.
- * If the Dalmatian has not been introduced to this program before he is 10 weeks, he will be too aware of his body and will likely not respond to this training format.