

Dog Training – A “Pawsitive” Approach!

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Getting a new dog is such a heartwarming and exciting experience – we all love the moments of introducing the pup to friends and family, learning about their favourite toys and activities, and enjoying life with a new four-legged friend.

Sometimes the “puppy moon” phase passes quickly, and the realities of pet ownership responsibility sets in. You might notice Baxter displaying irritating behaviours, for instance – whether a pup is barking, chewing, nipping, digging, or jumping, what we must understand as dog owners is that *dogs don't know the difference between what we see as “good” and “bad”* – they just live in the moment and express their emotions and instincts freely. Of course, these natural drives aren't always “okay” in a domestic environment, so that's when training techniques come in – but how does one help their dog succeed in the home and the community?

Dog training can be intimidating to someone unfamiliar with canine behaviour and the variety of training methods available. While many dog owners manage to teach their dog basic obedience (responding to commands such as “sit”, “stay”, and “lie down”), the training required to avoid “undesirable” behaviour isn't as straightforward.

Some dog owners may resort to positive punishment methods, such as the use of automatic shock (“bark”) collars, which the Saskatoon SPCA *opposes* for multiple reasons.



I spoke with Amber, our Polite Pups program instructor. Amber is a [Certified Professional Dog Trainer](#) (CPDT) and [Certified Canine Behavior Consultant](#) (CCBC), with over 2000 hours of instruction experience in dog training programs. Amber says that, aside from the ethical and humane implications of intentionally shocking an animal with electric currents, there are several problems with these collars:

- ❖ Unrelated noises or vibrations other than your dog's bark may set the collars off, causing the dog to be indiscriminately shocked;
- ❖ The pain of the shock causes heightened stress levels in the animals, which can cause physiological or behavioural health problems if repeatedly occurring, and
- ❖ Dogs will associate the pain of the shock with whatever stimuli happen to be present when the collar goes off. For example, *a dog who is shocked when barking at strangers may begin to associate strangers with the pain of the shock, which could cause that dog to become aggressive towards strangers.*

Amber recommends addressing the *root cause* of a dog's behaviour, rather than providing punishment. In the meantime, Amber says, certain behaviour management techniques may be used: a dog that is disruptive outside can be brought inside, a window the dog is barking at can have the blinds drawn, and dogs can be crated for brief periods of time when necessary.

Issues such as excessive barking can be improved with a good enrichment schedule that includes regular walks, playtime, and toys. If you find these remedies do not successfully reduce or eliminate your dog's unwanted behaviour, consulting with a professional who employs [positive reinforcement training methods](#) is the best way to ensure your next steps are both effective and humane.



Sadie: Found safe shelter on June 29, 2017 and a happy home on July 30th, 2017. Sadie participated in the Saskatoon SPCA's Polite Pups program with her adopter and learned skills including "wait", "settle", leave objects, polite leash walking, and recall.

Choosing a Training Program: What to Look For

There are a variety of training methods, including:

- ❖ Compulsion training – using force, punishment, and/or threats to compel a dog to perform a behavior. All forms of force and punishment work by creating fear in a dog. Fear is a primary cause of a variety of unwanted behaviours including aggression, destruction of property, excessive urination, and covering. Many consider this to be inhumane.
- ❖ Lure & Reward training – using a food reward for your dog to follow into a behaviour. This approach is humane and positive but limited in application and scope; your dog may become dependent on treats.
- ❖ Positive reinforcement training – Learning what your dog finds rewarding (e.g. some love treats, while others love toys) and using a reward and a clicker to mark when a dog performs all or part of the desired behaviour. [Clicker Training](#) provides the clearest communication between dog and owner and is an example of positive reinforcement.

The Saskatoon SPCA's Polite Pups program is a clicker training class, through the application of the [Karen Pryor Academy](#) curriculum. The Polite Pups program is a *positive-reinforcement, manners-based class* where you and your dog can learn together, with up to six other dogs and their owners! The modules taught in this program include *Attention & Focus, Self Control, Teamwork, Public Appearances, and Communication*. Students use a small sound-making device called a *clicker* to "mark" a desired behaviour, in conjunction with the use of treats and toys to reward the dog. *Clicker training requires some patience, and consistency is key!*

If your dog likes and behaves well with other dogs, Saskatoon SPCA recommends you seek our group classes rather than one-to-one training. Group classes provide the dual benefits of both training and socialization with new people and other animals.

However, if your dog struggles with aggression or reactivity toward other dogs, start with one-to-one training before considering group classes.

Choosing an Instructor

Aside from the class format and training approach, the individual instructing your classes is also an important component of your and your dog's training experience. Amber says that both formal education and practical experience is important when looking for an instructor. "There are lots of certifications out there," says Amber, "so look for instructors whose certification requirements include teaching hours, both as an apprentice and as a lead instructor."

When in class, Amber says it's important to ask questions! "If you don't feel comfortable posing the question in front of the class, pull your instructor aside. Everyone has different learning styles and an experienced trainer should be able to explain the concept in a way that is clear to you." Amber also says that *finding the right motivator (reward) for your dog in training is key*. "Dogs have preferences just like us. If you are struggling during a training session, changing the motivator may be just the thing. Different types of treats, toys, or social interaction can be used to motivate your dog."

Students of the Polite Pups program have reported that the skills taught in class were immediately effective in improving their dog's daily behaviour. Not only is the class fun and effective, but we're teaching dog owners how to teach their dog in a humane way that deepens their bond with their pet and improves their relationship overall. In fact, when we asked graduates what they would change about the course, they asked for more sessions because they enjoyed them so much!

Below is the testimony of one pet owner who experienced the Polite Pups class with their dog:

"(My dog) is calmer and more responsive to me. He walks better on a leash and will now wait for food when I tell him to. He listens to me much more and we have a stronger bond. I liked the positive reinforcement philosophy of the program... We loved it and looked forward to it." – Recent Graduate

Visit www.saskatoonspca.com/caring/politepups for more information and to enroll!

