

# CHRISTMAS PUPPIES

By Jane Marshall Dog Trainer

February is the time of year that puppies adopted at Christmas are surrendered to animal shelters.

They were cute and slept a lot when they were adopted. Now they are growing in size and confidence and creating havoc in the home. Favorite shoes have been chewed, the carpet is soiled and the kids are frightened of the puppy's needle sharp teeth.

There was such excitement and expectations when they were brought home. The decision to give them up for most people is not taken lightly, it involves a lot of tears and soul searching. But what went wrong, how could we help avoid this tragedy that replays itself every year?

Unrealistic expectations and a lack of understanding of normal dog and puppy behavior play a large role in this sad story. Puppies do chew your shoes if you don't pick them up. If not given the opportunity to go outside they will squat down and soil the carpet, and puppies think small children are littermates. Have you seen puppies play in a litter? They wrestle, chase and nip each other constantly. This is exactly what they do with the children of their new families. All of these behaviors that we consider "nuisance" behaviors are actually normal puppy behaviors.

Studies have shown that new dog owners give up their pets at a higher rate than experienced dog owners, it could be that the expectations of people who have had dogs previously are more realistic, and they have more of a basic understanding of dog behavior.

Answering the "hotline" for adopters at the animal shelter the same problems and questions seem to come up repeatedly. Often these problems are dealt with by reassuring new pet owners that all puppies do this, that what their pet is doing is in fact normal for a puppy of that age and then going on to make a plan for how to deal with it.

Housetraining a puppy, for example, when you understand how dogs learn is quite easy. It involves a lot of time and supervision, but it makes sense to the puppy and you can make him quite successful very quickly as well as saving your carpets!

Knowing two important facts about dog behavior helps greatly. Dogs, given the opportunity, are very clean animals, they do not like to soil the area where they live and sleep. The second piece of information that is helpful to us is that dogs like to go to the bathroom on a spot they have used before. So armed with these facts, we keep the dog in a safe place like a crate where their cozy bed is. The dog will try very hard to keep this space clean. Then we create a "toilet spot" outside and give the puppy lots of opportunities to use it. Walks in the neighborhood and playing in the house are only given after the puppy has used his toilet spot

.Simple! With this knowledge and routine you should get almost no mistakes in the house.

So where do new puppy owners go wrong? Not being able to housetrain a new pet is the number one reason dogs are surrendered to shelters.

Firstly, new pet owners tend to give puppies too much unsupervised freedom to make mistakes. The puppy soils the carpet and he is labeled a “bad” dog. He may even be punished, which is both inhumane and detrimental to the training process. Punishing a puppy for going to the bathroom in the house only makes the puppy afraid of you. Next time he will go and hide behind the sofa or run into another room.

Unsupervised freedom in the house also gives the puppy opportunities to chew household items that you don’t want him to. Would you let an 18 month old toddler wander round your house unsupervised? Would we expect a toddler to know the difference between your Spode china and his Fisher Price toys? No, we constantly help children of this age to learn what they can and cannot do. We do not punish this age group for making a mistake. If the child breaks the china we immediately blame ourselves for not watching him. It is this same level of supervision that a puppy needs and the same level of tolerance that if the puppy makes a bad choice it is our fault for not helping him to get it right.

If we can have greater patience with the puppy and understand that we are responsible for helping him make the right choices we can avoid some of the pitfalls that new adopters fall into. Here are some common misconceptions about puppies that dog trainers deal with all the time:

- **“He knows exactly what I mean:”** Usually he has no idea what you mean, how would he, he is a puppy and he speaks another language.
- **“He did it on purpose”** or **“he is trying to get his own back”** (often referring to house soiling or chewing an item) Dogs don’t think like that and they don’t behave like that. This has some suggestion of planning, which is quite high level thinking (more commonly seen in people!) In these situations the puppy was simply not supervised well enough.
- **“He doesn’t listen.”** Why should he? He is a puppy and he is interested in puppy things. It is your job to train him patiently and over a long period of time to listen to you. You have to be worthy of him listening to you by having some understanding of him Do children always listen to you when they are doing something fun?
- **“He doesn’t come when called”** Have you taught him? Puppies are not born knowing how to do this. It takes months and months to teach a dog to come when called, and then they may choose not to! This is why we have leashes and fenced yards It is our responsibility to keep our dogs safe.

If we have a greater understanding of how our dogs think and learn, not only can we train them and help them to become better family members but we will have more realistic goals, and greater patience with them when things are not going well. According to the American Humane Association 96% of the dogs surrendered to animal shelters have had no basic training

So if your Christmas puppy is just starting to drive you crazy join a puppy class. Puppy Kindergarten is a great way to learn about puppy behavior and how to train a puppy. An added bonus is, like any “support group” you will be comforted to see that all puppy owners struggle with the same issues. Hopefully, by the time next Christmas comes you will have a young dog who is a pleasure to be with.

