



Q + A with Natalie Piper

spotlight on dog training

Not only is Natalie Piper a Certified Dog Behavior Consultant, a Certified Dog Trainer under CCPDT & ABC (Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers & Animal Behavior College), and a Certified Family Dog Mediator, she also has a BA degree in Animal Science from the University of Illinois. She is well known in our community for being one of the best dog trainers around, and we're proud to say that we go way back with her!

Natalie was the Champaign County Humane Society Volunteer Coordinator and Animal Behavior Specialist from 2014-2018. During that time she was responsible for evaluating the behavior and temperament of all shelter animals, heavily focused on dogs and cats. She also was responsible for *human* training - specifically, training volunteers and staff on safe, humane animal handling and training techniques.

Natalie also taught - and continues to teach - the CCHS dog training classes for pet owners and adopters. She has conducted hundreds of dog-dog introductions for potential adopters and talked to countless pet owners on the phone about behavior issues they were having with their pets. So, for this issue of *Paw Prints*, we asked Natalie about her approach to dog training.

Q: Can you provide some guidance on when a dog owner should seek a "behavior

consultant" rather than enroll their dog in a training class?

A: For dogs who seem at ease in a large space with several other dogs and people nearby, group training class is likely a good fit! Dogs who are sometimes fearful, overly excited, or aggressive towards strangers or other dogs might struggle to learn in a group class setting. Plus, they could distract the other participants or present a safety concern. These behaviors are rooted in "big feelings" and are best addressed one on one.

Q: What's the most common problem you're seeing right now in your behavior consulting practice?

A: The most common problems people contact me about are: Leash pulling, barking, fear of strangers, overexcitement (especially around guests or animals), and resource guarding.

Q: Why do you think that is?

A: Sometimes peoples' best intentions backfire and inadvertently "add fuel" for unwanted dog behavior. Depending on the dog and how it's done, neighborhood walks, long games of fetch, and even training efforts can be misguided.

Also, as humans we have a negativity bias - it is our nature to notice the unwanted dog behaviors and react. We often ignore the dog when they offer behaviors we would actually really like to see

repeated. Many dogs learn that the quickest way to access what they want is to engage in behaviors that most people don't like, such as pulling on leash and barking.

Ultimately, in our modern world most dogs don't do the original jobs humans selectively bred dogs to do. A lot of pet dogs are bored. Behaviors that come naturally to them like exploring, chewing, digging, foraging, and shredding are often unwanted by pet parents in most contexts, which can leave both the dog and the human frustrated.

Q: Can you describe how you address that kind of problem?

A: To teach your dog desirable behaviors as habits, it is helpful to notice what's going right and let your dog know that you like it! For instance, notice and feed a tiny piece of food when your dog offers engagement with you on a loose leash. With some time and consistency, the behaviors you desire become strong habits for your dog.

Management to prevent unwanted behaviors is also critical to success. Each time a dog engages in a behavior, it becomes more of a habit. Come up with a plan, be proactive, and set your dog up for success. It is well worth the effort. As your dog's skill level progresses, management can be relaxed or eliminated.

A longer leash is one example of using management to reduce leash pulling. An 8-15 foot leash allows more natural canine movement than the standard shorter leashes most people use. The idea is to teach the dog that the tactile cue of a slack leash equals great things for them.

For unwanted behaviors that are rooted in "big feelings" it's best to work with your vet and a certified dog behavior professional. The idea is to change the dog's emotional response, which will cause the unwanted behavior to go away. This is typically done through counterconditioning and desensitization. For example if a dog has "big

feelings" about the vacuum, you might start by tossing a small piece of food each time the dog calmly looks at the vacuum. And you might need to start with the vacuum unplugged, laying flat on the floor, far away from the dog. It is best to work in thin slices and it can be surprising how quickly drastic behavior-change can happen!

Q: If you could give all new dog adopters the two or three most important tips for getting off on the right foot at home, what would they be?

A: I recommend that new adopters keep things relatively boring for the first few weeks at home. This is a time to build predictable routines your dog can count on. You might hide some treats for them to sniff out or learn how to handle a long leash safely and get them out in a natural area to explore. Have a dedicated space where they can rest undisturbed by people or other pets. Learn to read their body language so you can be a better friend to them. And remember patience is key - your dog has just left behind everything familiar to them and they're in an adjustment period. It gets easier with time! 🐾



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