



Managing Expectations and Setting Criteria

Introduction

Managing your expectations is an important factor to consider when training your puppy. When asking your puppy for a behavior, pausing (or should that be pawing?) to question “Is this a reasonable expectation for us today, in this particular environment?” can help to set you and your puppy up for success!

What Do We Mean by “Reasonable Expectations?”

When we talk about reasonable expectations, we mean that you are not asking your puppy to perform a skill or behave in a certain way that is unrealistic for their age, or the environment you are in at that moment. Your puppy needs a chance to first learn skills in a calm environment with minimal distractions. Practicing in one room of your home is a good place to start and then move to different rooms of your home practicing the basics, before you venture out into a more distracting environment. We always want to set our puppies up for success, so trying to push things to far too soon may well result in frustration for both you and your puppy!

How About “Setting Criteria?”

Setting criteria is closely related to expectations. Setting criteria in dog training refers to how high we are “setting the bar” for a particular behavior or exercise. For example, staying in a sit for 5 seconds, or walking nicely on the leash for 3 steps, or doing puppy push-ups without physical cues. As our puppies make progress and mature, we can raise the criteria we are setting, but again we need to consider whether our expectations on a given day, in a particular environment, are reasonable and achievable.

It's also good to remember that in some scenarios, you may need to lower your expectations and criteria when previously your puppy had been performing at a higher level. I'm sure we have all experienced our puppies performing a behavior perfectly at home and then seeming to have forgotten everything when we get to class! They haven't forgotten though, they are just struggling to focus in a more distracting environment with new sights, sounds, and smells. Our puppies also go through developmental stages where they may appear to have forgotten everything due to brain and body growth spurts. When this happens, we have to be patient, generous, and flexible with our expectations, set lower criteria, and remember that going back to basics for a while is never a bad thing!