

Modern Puppy Training Gets It Wrong

Why Puppies Need More Than Obedience, Exposure, and Management

KELLY DUNBAR • IACP 2026

Dogs gave me a life.

Charlie Brown came into my life when I was five and died just before I graduated from high school.

Dogs have given me friends, travel, work, life lessons, and ultimately a life purpose.

About Me

- Basic training and obedience
- Shelter work, where I saw the consequences of missed developmental experiences
- Two decades directing Sirius Puppy Training
- Built the complete developmental puppy program beyond puppy class
- Raised companion, service, and sport puppies
- Two French Ring-titled Belgian Malinois

I could talk about puppies for a full week! Maybe longer.

I never get bored with this. It is one of my favorite subjects.

We have 90 minutes. I am not going to try to tell you everything I know. I want to change what you prioritize.

People are often surprised by how little formal training my young puppies have.

That is deliberate.

Obedience training is the easy part.

I know you know how to teach sit, down, stand, recall. A lot of you do it really friggin' well.

A very young puppy can make a mediocre trainer look pretty accomplished.

Young puppies are incredibly malleable. Sharp, fiery, eager little working puppies can look spectacular very quickly.

Sometimes flashy puppy obedience makes me a little anxious.

That kind of polish takes time and repetitions. And the clock is ticking.

The Beautifully Trained Puppy

Imagine a beautifully trained 12-week-old puppy doing flashy obedience. Beautiful engagement. Perfect sits. Downs. Recall

What does that performance actually tell us?

It can tell us a lot about the trainer's ability to train behavior.

But what happens when the performance is over?

Beautiful obedience can hide developmental gaps.

When the performance is over...

- Can the puppy explore independently?
- Recover from being startled?
- Disengage from another dog?
- Settle without being confined?
- Tolerate frustration?
- Handle being handled?
- Cope when nobody is giving instructions?

What kind of adult dog are you building?

Build capacity, not just compliance.

Urgent vs. Important

This is an exercise I have used with puppy trainers and now with my mentorship students.

What is important to teach a puppy?

What is urgent to teach a puppy?

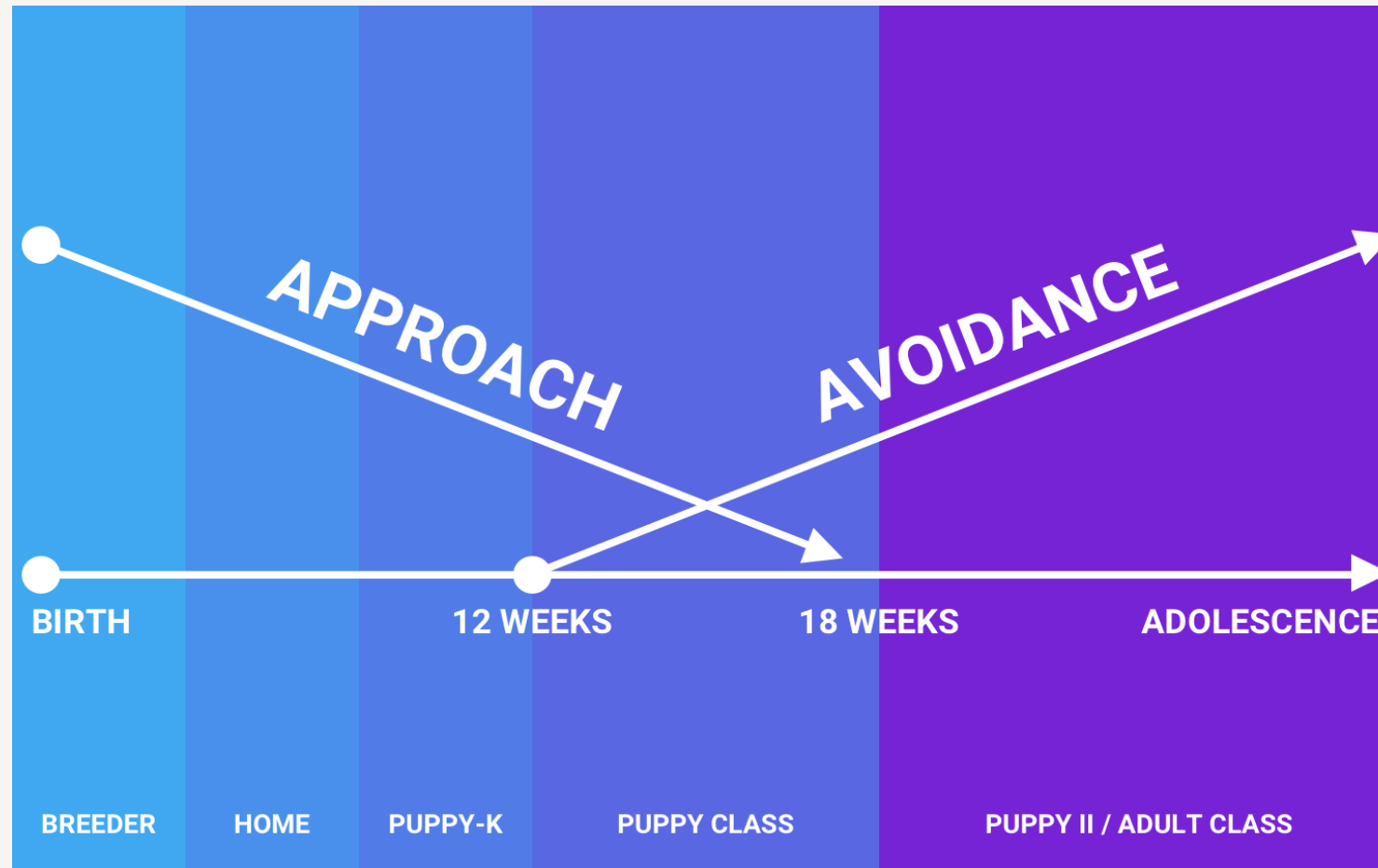
Where do those lists overlap?

What deserves the puppy's first few precious weeks?

Dogs can learn behaviors throughout their lives.

What I cannot give an adult dog is the same malleability, openness, and optimism of early puppyhood.

The Developmental Clock



Not a cutoff date. Not identical for every puppy or every breed type.

THE DEVELOPMENTAL WINDOW DOES NOT SLAM SHUT.

It gradually declines.

The timing varies by individual and by breed type.

Whenever the puppy comes to you, start the developmental work immediately. It is always worth doing. But as the puppy gets older, some of that work becomes more difficult and requires more care.

The clock is ticking.

The earlier I get my hands on the puppy, the better.

Not because I can teach obedience sooner, but because I have more time to build the foundations that become remedial work if neglected early on.

You can teach obedience later.

You cannot give an adult dog its puppyhood back.

So what am I doing instead?

THE DEVELOPMENTAL CURRICULUM

The foundation work comes long before formal obedience.

I am much more interested in building a well-rounded, well-padded, confident and capable puppy who is ready for whatever life, work, or sport eventually asks of them.

The developmental curriculum

- Environmental acclimation + novelty
- Social competence + neutrality
- Handling + body comfort
- Mouth control + bite inhibition
- Play + exploration
- Following + proximity
- Settling + sleep + separation
- Frustration + recovery
- Object exchange + resource-guarding prevention
- Greeting rituals
- Appropriate adult-dog interactions
- Learning to ask for help

Learning that the world is safe enough to explore, and I am safe enough to return to.

SOCIALIZATION IS SO MUCH MORE THAN SOCIALIZING.

Owners often hear “socialization” and think puppy play. Trainers may expand that to people, surfaces, objects, and field trips.

All useful. Still incomplete.

I think more broadly about acclimation.

People. Places. Things. Sounds. Surfaces. Movement. Handling. Observation. Frustration. Recovery. Neutrality. Rest.

I'm trying to build a puppy who knows how to move through the world.

Exposure is important. I'm more interested in the response.

I want novelty to become normalized.

Not scary. Not wildly exciting. Just part of life.

Know how to say hello. Know when to say hello. Know how to walk past.

I rarely punish prosocial behavior.

Yes, exuberant puppies still need manners. I teach a greeting ritual without punishing them for having a personality or being happy to see people.

Today's novelty is tomorrow's normal.

Sometimes the puppy explores. Sometimes they watch. Sometimes they sleep in a carrier while the world happens around them. Passive acclimation counts.

TWO OPPOSITE MISTAKES

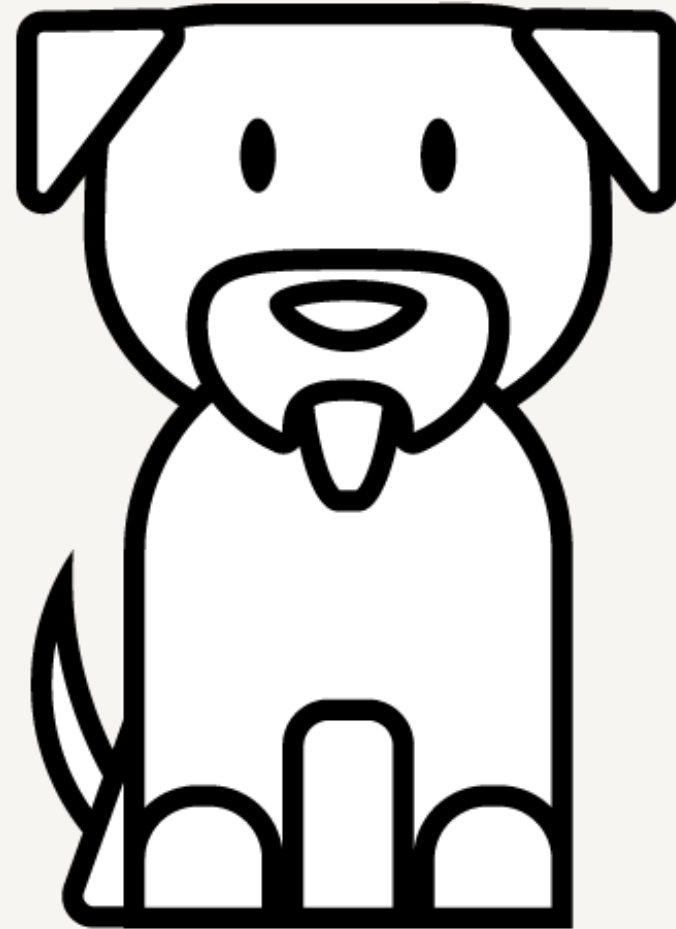
Protect the puppy from everything
→ too little experience, too little coping

Orchestrate and control everything
→ too little exploration, too little independent thinking

Neither one builds the puppy I want.

Meet Fido.

He is fictional. His problems are not.



Puppy Challenge #1: Fido startles

A broom falls. A statue looks strange. Something flaps in the wind. A mechanical decoration suddenly moves.

Fido startles hard.

What do you do next?



What I do

- Acknowledge what happened
- Give enough space to think
- Watch for regulation and a check-in
- If curiosity returns, investigate together
- If the puppy is overwhelmed, create distance
- If the event was enormous, break it into microdoses and revisit later

I let puppies have feelings.

Fear is information.

I am not trying to punish it, suppress it, or prove that the puppy can survive it.

Resilience is not best built by manufacturing hardship.

A puppy living in a bubble does not learn resilience.

A puppy forced through overwhelming stress has not necessarily learned resilience either.

Life will provide challenge. I do not need to manufacture hardship for its own sake.

Don't measure the challenge. Measure the puppy.

Measure the Puppy

- Can they think?
- Can they check back in?
- Can they play?
- Can they seek help?
- Can curiosity return?
- How quickly do they recover?
- What did the experience teach them about themselves, me, and the world?

Adjust the challenge to the puppy.

Puppy Challenge #2: Fido objects to handling

You touch him. He whips his head toward your hand. His mouth tightens. His body stiffens. Maybe he growls. Maybe he screams.

Correction, retreat, or information?

Behavior is information.

My job is to change the emotional response, not punish the puppy for having one.

Change One Variable

- Shorter touch
- Lighter touch
- Different body part
- Different position
- Food
- Movement
- Duration
- Pressure
- Proximity

Work in increments small enough that the puppy can succeed.

I want more than tolerance.

I want acceptance, and ideally enjoyment.

If the baseline is merely tolerance, pain, fear, restraint, or an unfamiliar person can push the dog into intolerance and reaction.

If the baseline is genuine acceptance or enjoyment, those same stressors have farther to push them. The dog may drop into tolerance rather than conflict.

I want more than tolerance.

Ara: The Desired Outcome



An intensely driven Malinois who could still use me as information under pain and veterinary handling.

Puppy Challenge #3: Fido becomes a gremlin

The adorable puppy gets wet after dark.

Biting. Zooming. Jumping. Barking. Grabbing clothes. Getting into everything.

More exercise? Maybe exactly the opposite.

A dysregulated puppy can look exactly like an under-exercised puppy.

Very often the puppy is tired, hungry, over-aroused, or all three.

Teach the Downshift

Passive chew projects. Licking. Stuffed Toppls. Chews. Quiet tethering. A pen near us. Massage. Lower energy. Conditioned white noise. Sleep.

Netflix and Chew.

Containment has its place.

Crates, pens, and tethers can manage a puppy beautifully.

But if the puppy only knows how to settle when isolated and confined, management may be hiding a developmental gap.

Can the puppy fall asleep at your feet while life continues?

Life is the lesson.

I do not fit developmental experiences around the puppy's training schedule. Living with the puppy is the developmental work.

A day with a puppy is the curriculum.

We go somewhere. Something happens. We work through it. We play. We explore. We eat. We separate. We reconnect. The puppy sleeps.

There may be a marker session or a chase game, but there often isn't a formal "training session."

Play, training, and daily life become one tapestry.

A good puppy day might contain...

- A new place, person, object, sound, or surface
- Exploration and personal play
- Handling
- A car ride
- An appropriate adult dog
- A food toy
- A nap somewhere other than a crate
- Settled time alone and settled time near me
- A little frustration and successful recovery
- Hide-and-seek or a greeting ritual

Get out. Experience life. Then sleep enough to process it.

Me AND the world.

I want the puppy magnetized to me without becoming myopic. Able to explore the environment without sacrificing the relationship.

Ferro



Bold, confident, curious, environmentally interested, and less needy for me.

Not aloof. Not uncooperative.

Describe the puppy in front of you.

Be careful with labels. “Independent,” “stubborn,” “soft,” “hard,” “dominant” can become conclusions instead of information.

I made myself enticing.

Movement. Play. Chase. Moving away instead of toward him. Tiny moments of attention. Then back to the environment.

I did not use deprivation to make myself artificially valuable.

The environment and I are not competitors.

Think bungee cord.

Puppy goes out. Puppy comes back.
Puppy goes out. Puppy comes back.

A glance may be enough. One step toward me. A quick chase. Then I release the puppy back to what they wanted.

I weave myself into the environment instead of positioning myself against it.

Premack gives me leverage without conflict.

The puppy wants things. Good. That gives me enormous leverage without needing conflict.

Cooperation Becomes Access

- Tiny bit of attention → go sniff
- Come out of play → go back to play
- Give me the toy → get the toy again
- Come with me → go explore
- Pause before greeting → go say hello

I am part of access to the world, not the obstacle standing between the puppy and it.

Life is the lesson. Drills are still useful.

Greeting rituals. Attention cues. Sound cues. Following. Object exchanges. Coming out of play. Handling patterns. Check-ins.

Rehearse them under easy conditions. Make them happy. Make them fluent. Make them nearly reflexive.

Do not wait to rehearse the response until you are standing inside the challenge.

So when do I teach obedience?

Of course I teach obedience. I simply do not treat it as the developmental emergency.

Somewhere around 12–16 weeks... give or take.

Depending on the puppy, I begin formalizing more. Earlier sometimes. Later sometimes. I am not particularly concerned about the calendar.

The foundation matters more than the birthday.

Ideally, I already have...

- A puppy who follows and plays
- A puppy who can disengage and trade
- A puppy who seeks me out
- A puppy who can settle
- A puppy who tolerates frustration
- A puppy comfortable in different environments
- A puppy who can notice distractions without disappearing into them
- A puppy who likes learning

Now I can name it, polish it, and add precision.

The behavior can exist before the cue does.

A casual sit can precede a formal sit. Following can precede heel. Chase and hide-and-seek can precede formal recall criteria.

I need far less coercion and artificial control when cooperation is already there.

Ara Doing Her Thing



ARA IS THE LONG GAME

People have asked me how I got an extremely intense Belgian Malinois through the ring sport routine without training tools.

She could work off-leash under enormous arousal. And years later, in significant pain at the veterinarian, she could still look into my eyes, stay connected to me, and let them work.

Those are two very different demands on a dog.

SAME DOG. SAME PUPPY FOUNDATION.

They came from the same foundation.

Remember my “untrained” puppies?

They were learning all day long.

Before formal obedience becomes the priority, they are learning...

How to explore

How to recover

How to communicate

How to settle

How to play and disengage

How to tolerate frustration

How to seek help

How to use their mouth

How to be handled

How to be alone and together

How to learn

How to get access to the world through cooperation

By the time I formalize obedience, the puppy is already trained in the things I care about most.

Look at the puppy in front of you. Reimagine your priorities.

- Distinguish management from development
 - Compliance from capacity
 - Exposure from acclimation.
 - Surviving stress from developing resilience.
 - Looking at you from being generally comfortable in the world.
-

What deserves this puppy's first few precious weeks?

These first weeks are precious.

Spend them accordingly.

TAKE THE TALK WITH YOU

The conference resources, Puppy Project map, expanded notes, references, and early access will all live in one place.

kellydunbardogtraining.com



THE PUPPY PROJECT by Kelly Dunbar

Building the dog beneath the training.

Take the talk with you.

Conference map • expanded notes • references • early access to the trainer curriculum

JOIN THE EARLY-ACCESS LIST



Thank you!



Thank you for your time and attention.
It means so much to me.