

## Creating a “School of Thought” for Puppies

by Diane Patterson, owner of *The Agility Mindset, LLC*

It’s exciting to consider the future of your new puppy and its potential. You’ve imagined a picture for your pup that shows a happy, resilient, playful, obedient dog, equipped with skills to adapt confidently to environmental changes. There are numerous “schools of thought” on how to create such a dog, and, one that is fun for both you and your pup is to reward and encourage thinking. It’s easy to do!

Humans learn quickly and deeply through information and visual pictures. Let’s say your coach wants to win the game. How the coach delivers that message is key. Telling players to “miss the kick and we lose the game” sets a bleak picture and a feeling of disappointment in mind and body. There’s a view though, that empowers us to be our best. “I believe you’ll kick a winning goal,” pictures success and fulfillment. The goal is the same, the school of thought impacts which result occurs. In your dog’s school of thought where you are the coach, how you present a “goal for the win” message matters greatly.

Your dog’s brain has about 56 million neurons ready to fire, re-wire and build mental connections through the electrical stimulation events provide. At sixteen weeks of age, your pup’s brain is about 80% developed, and, mentally and socially, dogs are considered to be in a puppy stage until around four years

of age. The term “puppy brain” is real and can last much longer than the age at which your dog reaches physical maturity.

As a caring owner, providing “thought-full” learning opportunities appropriate to their mental capabilities encourages positive connections, problem solving skills and focus. An improved relationship and bond with your dog are often two added values of thinking.

Puzzle and focus toys that dispense treats are super ways to start your dog’s adventure in learning as they work to win the rewards hidden within. Provide different games, toys, textures to challenge your dog’s level of learning and engagement. A diversity of experiences is valuable in the learning process, and in time, your pup is likely to challenge you to come up with even more training activities to keep her/his brain stimulated and engaged! Creating a dog that loves to learn is a super power, and a super goal to have!

It’s normal for a dog to show signs of frustration in the form of whining, barking, or offering behaviors that have nothing to do with the play at hand during “thinking training.” Stay calm, this is the moment at which thinking is happening! Your urge may be to jump in and do the task for your dog to alleviate its frustration. Try to focus your efforts to provide support through encouragement and perhaps a re-start of the game. When the game is done, your dog will likely be thirsty and tired from the brain workout!

In your training, work to build in daily doses of “thinking” training to support the goals you envisioned when you got your pup. Engaging their brains can speed



up learning processes and cementing of concepts in meaningful ways. You’re like to find a by-product of a “thinking” dog is that less time is required by you to train behaviors. Bonus!

A mental reminder to yourself before you engage with your dog can be helpful to keeping on task. It might go something like this: “I empower my dog to think and learn. I encourage my dog to engage with thought-full toys, puzzles and opportunities, because doing this increases my dog’s ability to problem solve, remain calm and steady in new or crisis situations, and offer more behaviors that I like.”

Sample thinking toys and puzzles: Buster Treat Ball, Buster Activity Mat, Ruffwear Huckama and Turnup.

*“Nothing is more important than this day.” Your puppy does not know how to tell time on the clock, or dates on a calendar. Your puppy lives in a state of awareness of this moment, in this present, in this now. Your job (and, it’s a joyful one!) is simply this .... picture your puppy’s best life and make it happen.*

Diane Patterson is the owner of The Agility Mindset, LLC, a personal mindset and dog training business dedicated to helping people and dogs reach their peak performance. A former AKC World Team member, Diane currently has 3 Shetland Sheepdogs and a rescued terrier-mix.

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