

Puppies and Children... So Much Alike

By Marc Goldberg

Rowdy little children and naughty little puppies have so much in common! Let's learn from the human example, so we can quickly and gently redirect puppies away from naughtiness, toward great and fun behaviors.

I sat trapped on the airplane, hurtling toward Orlando, strapped into my seat, some 30,000 feet above ground. I say “trapped” because my seat, my entire row even, was constantly shaken, bumped and tossed by a pair of blond haired, angelic looking little monsters in the row in front of me.

Michael, twelve, and his brother, eight, found relief from boredom in the only way they knew how...by fighting, wrestling and annoying everyone for three rows in all directions.

At first, I, too, was irritated by the little blond cretins. But as their father finally erupted out of his seat to threaten the boys with bodily harm, I began to smile. I nearly laughed in fact. Not because the boys were finally getting a stern talking to. But because of the image that came to me.

Suddenly, the kids reminded me of a pair of blond Golden Retriever puppies, happy, rowdy...and completely out of control. Michael and David, lacking any direction from their parents, defaulted to known behaviors on that flight. They “tore it up, from the floor up.”

Dad yelled at the children in that low, angry tone well-bred parents use when what they really want to do is scream out loud at their kids in the Walmart. And he scared them. Most of coach was grateful. But the good effects from that dressing down were all too temporary. My seat began to rock and roll once again. The puppies—I mean the kids—defaulted back to standard boy behaviors.

That’s when mom intervened. She came bearing gifts. Sweetly she told them that their choices included certain death at the hands of their father...or they could do the activity games in the shopping bag she dropped in their laps. She walked away.

The boys tore into that sack like Golden puppies into a Kong stuffed with liverwurst. Bags of pretzels, disposable cameras, coloring books and playing cards gushed from that cornucopia of childhood goodies like a geyser from Old Faithful.

This was a good thing.

Mind you, they were still boys.



“Are we almost there yet?”

“How much minutes left?”

Questions and protest still gave the boys opportunity to be, well, boys. But the worst of the pandemonium was over.

I have this bizarre tendency to view dog training as a metaphor for life itself. Not much in the way of human behavior escapes some direct correlation to dogs in my view. So I thought about Michael and David and about why they reminded me so much of puppies. Then it hit me.

Dad came along and told them what not to do. And that didn't function for more than a few moments. Mom had a better idea. She showed the boys a new behavior they could do, concurrently presenting them with a consequence if they failed to choose the new, and more rewarding behavior she designed for them.

The parallel to our lives comes when helping dogs or puppies stop unwanted behavior. It is effective to teach a dog a new behavior that is incompatible with his unwanted behavior. It is less effective to simply correct a dog for doing the bad thing.

Take jumping on people. You can simply correct for it. But temptation remains. Plus, get with the 21st Century already. We have dogs for the “warm and fuzzies.” We are ever less likely to knee their dog off when the dog just wants to greet us. So instead of battling the dog, why not teach him to sit and offer paw to solicit attention? He can't do that and jump now can he? Plus it's such an engaging trick that it's likely to win much more notice for the dog, and thus, becomes self-rewarding.

Some dog trainers routinely teach the same “sit and give paw” routine to space guarding dogs. A dog won't often sit and shake and guard space from a child all at the same time. I handle this problem in a different way. Using a gentle touch with the leash and collar, I teach the dog to move, and give up any space humans want to take. Either way, you've taught the dog what TO do as much as what NOT to do.

As for Michael and David, they played with their new toys for quite a while. I eyeballed them periodically, however, waiting for the old behavior to reassert itself. I smile, thinking about the dog training equipment nestled in my checked baggage. If only I could do children, we could all retire to my own private island, where dogs run free and children behave.

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