



Guide Dogs for the Blind

Puppy Raising Department Ruff Notes – May 2018

Someone's at the Door!

Leaders frequently get questions about how to handle puppies who become overly excited when visitors come to the raisers' homes. We have also heard from our Field Service Managers that this often continues to be an issue for graduates too. Here are some tips and reminders that you can share with your raisers to help keep puppies calm when guests arrive.

We have seen a big improvement in people distraction/solicitous behavior in our puppies since we encouraged raisers to put their puppies on a “no pet policy” in public. This, combined with R+ methods, has resulted in puppies that are much more handler focused and less engaged with other people in the environment. We can apply the same methods to teach puppies to be calm when guests come to the home.

Visitors to the home should be instructed to ignore the puppy. This may mean asking visitors to not look at, talk to, or touch the puppy. The puppy should be set up for success and unfortunately, many visitors to the household will not understand what this means. Visitors can contribute to the pup's training by following instructions while the raiser reinforces the puppy for calm behavior. If the raiser knows that certain visitors will not be able to follow instructions, the puppy should be crated/kept separated when those individuals come to the home. Parents of junior raisers may have to be especially vigilant to ensure that young guests in the home are not undermining the raiser's efforts.

The behavior of other dogs in the household can affect the GDB puppy's reaction to visitors. Sometimes training the pet dogs to be calm and offer alternative behaviors is key to success with the puppy!

At the Door

The initial excitement occurs when someone knocks at the door or the doorbell rings. If these sounds have already become a stimulus for the puppy to ramp up its behavior, it would be a good idea to enlist the help of someone to make the noise multiple times in a row, while the raiser rewards the puppy for calm behavior utilizing one of the methods below. Practicing the noise combined with Go to Bed/Hand Tether/Paw Pad many times a day, at different times of day, will result in the puppy taking the noise as a cue to control itself, either by settling on its bed or focusing on the raiser.

The preferred alternate behavior to rushing the door is for the puppy to go to a mat or bed and lie down. However, it is unrealistic to expect the puppy to be able to offer this behavior until it has a good foundation in the “Go To Bed” exercise (<https://www.guidedogs.com/uploads/files/Puppy-Raising-Manual/Go-To-Bed.pdf>).

So while building the puppy's “Go To Bed” skills, the raiser can utilize two other R+ methods to teach impulse control – Hand Tether (<https://www.guidedogs.com/uploads/files/Puppy-Raising-Manual/Hand-Tether-Game-Guidelines.pdf>) and Paw Pad Game 2 (<https://www.guidedogs.com/uploads/files/Puppy-Raising-Manual/Paw-Pad-Game-2.pdf>).

Both of these games should be part of the repertoire of younger puppies; once the pup is showing an understanding of these games they can be practiced around the door with a helper acting as the “visitor”. The raiser should remember the “Three Ds” of Distraction, Distance and Duration! Initially the puppy should be kept well back of the entryway and given a high rate of reinforcement for staying in place, either on a loose leash in heel position and/or on the Paw Pad. The helper should ring the bell and come in, then leave again quickly without looking at the puppy. This should be done many times until the pup willingly stays in place without attempting to leave its position. Then the helper can come in a little further or stay a little longer. Gradually the raiser and pup can move a little closer to the door but always making sure the puppy is being set up for success. Remember positive reinforcement is about preventing mistakes from happening and rewarding desirable behavior!

If real visitors come to the door while the puppy is still being trained and the raiser feels the pup would be over-stimulated, the pup should be put on tie-down or crated while the raiser deals with the visitor. For puppies that are reliable on the Go to Bed cue and have some duration, the game should be practiced on a mat/bed placed 8-20 feet away from the door. Initially the raiser can knock on the door, quickly followed by the “Go to Bed” cue. The pup should be heavily reinforced for going to the bed/mat and duration gradually introduced. Then a helper can pretend to be a visitor while the raiser reinforces the pup for making the choice of going to its bed when there is a knock on the door. Eventually the knock/ring will become the puppy’s cue to go to its bed!

Manners Around Guests

If the puppy is not ready for long periods of staying on its bed, or as an alternative to being on its bed, the raiser can practice rewarding for calm behavior with the pup on leash next to the raiser:

<https://www.guidedogs.com/uploads/files/Puppy-Raising-Manual/Food-Reward-for-Calm-Behavior-Guidelines.pdf>

<https://www.guidedogs.com/uploads/files/Puppy-Raising-Manual/Teaching-Settled-Behavior-in-the-Home.pdf>

Once again, it will be much easier for the pup to settle if the guests ignore the puppy.

Only when the puppy has demonstrated consistently that it can be calm and ignore guests may the guests interact with the puppy. For some puppies this may mean months of practice before they have earned the privilege of interacting with guests. When the visitor greets the puppy they should be low- key and be ready to increase the distance away from the pup if it becomes too aroused. It is recommended that the raiser keep the pup on leash and/or utilize the Paw Pad and dispense a very high rate of food reward to keep the puppy’s focus on the raiser. Gradually the food rewards are slowed and given more intermittently for the puppy keeping “four on the floor” and remaining calm.

As the pup progresses through training and matures, it can be given more freedom around guests but the raiser must be prepared to return to “training mode” should the pup’s behavior escalate.

The most challenging aspect of teaching a GDB puppy to be calm with visitors is controlling the behavior of the visitors! That is why it is highly recommended that these games and exercises be practiced with helpers (other club members going to each other’s home would be ideal!) before expecting the puppy to be well-behaved around guests. Better to put the pup on tie-down or in a crate than risk it practicing inappropriate behaviors.

If the raiser feels the puppy is continuing to be overly-aroused at the door or around guests the leader should be informed so that a behavior plan can be initiated for the puppy.