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Chapter I

Wellness Care for Your Puppy's Behavioral Health

Congratulations on adding a new puppy to your family! You are starting on a journey that should last until your puppy becomes a gray-faced senior. Despite the unavoidable bumps along the way, those years should be filled with fun and love as you and your dog share each other's lives. Puppyhood is crucially important to you and your puppy. It's both an incredibly fun time and a tremendous responsibility.



There is no other time you can have more influence over your puppy's behavior and the type of dog she becomes than now. You won't get the chance to redo or undo these formative weeks.

How responsive your dog is to you, how she gets along with other dogs and people of all types, and how easy she is to live with will be largely determined by what you do before your puppy is six months old.

It will be up to you, with help from many resources, to do what it takes to have your puppy develop into the wonderful adult companion you had in mind. Your veterinarian will teach you how to keep your puppy healthy through proper diet, dental care, exercise, regular veterinary exams and vaccinations. Keeping your dog's weight within certain limits, checking her teeth and gums to be sure they are clean and not inflamed, making sure her coat is clean and free from mats, and keeping her nails comfortably short are all signs you are maintaining your puppy in good physical health. We'll introduce you to these topics in the next chapter.



What is Behavior Wellness?

But what about your puppy's behavioral health? Do you know the signs that indicate your puppy is behaviorally healthy? This is a new concept for most puppy owners and professionals alike. You may tend to judge your puppy's behavior based on the absence of problems, rather than from the presence of desirable behaviors.

As a new puppy owner you may be thinking, "I don't want her to pee on the carpet," or, "I don't want her to bark at the neighbors." From the stand-

point of behavioral health, instead you'll think, "I want her to relieve herself outside," or "I want her to be friendly but quiet when she sees the neighbors." Describing your puppy's behavior based on characteristics you **do** want, rather than ones you don't, is a wellness perspective.

Having a behavior wellness perspective means defining normal and acceptable behaviors you want your puppy to have, implementing concrete training and management plans which will help your puppy develop these behavioral habits, continually paying attention to the status of your puppy's behavioral health, and knowing how to get help when you need it.

If you are taking care of your puppy's behavioral health, you aren't waiting until problems develop to take action. Every day you are taking steps to help your puppy develop healthy behavior patterns.

But how do we define the healthy behavior patterns you are striving for? How do we describe a behaviorally healthy dog?



Characteristics of Behaviorally Healthy Dogs

As your puppy grows up, somehow she just won't passively turn into the companion you want. You have to describe how you want your dog to behave, so you can then discover what you need to do to encourage those behaviors.

To help you get started, we've provided a list of good behaviors that most people want from their dogs, and behaviors that make your dog a safe and enjoyable member of your community. We've taken into account what we can realistically expect from our canine companions, given what's normal behavior for dogs. We've also provided an overview of your role in molding those behaviors.

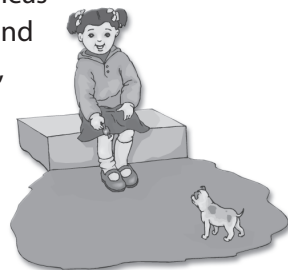
Behaviorally Healthy Dogs:

Are affectionate without being "needy"

A behaviorally healthy dog is bonded to the family, but can amuse herself without constantly demanding attention. Spend quality time with your puppy, and behave in a trustworthy and predictable fashion so a strong bond of companionship develops between the two of you. Avoid reinforcing annoying, pestering behaviors by ignoring them and instead teach your puppy to sit, lie down, or wait quietly to get your attention. You should also pay attention to your puppy when she isn't pestering you.

Are friendly toward friendly people and well-behaved children

Socialize your puppy by letting her have many pleasant experiences with people of different sizes and ages, wearing all kinds of clothing, with beards, glasses, unusual gaits, as well as assistive devices like canes and wheelchairs. Pay particular attention to socializing your puppy to children of all ages. Read more about how to do this in Chapter 3. The importance of socialization cannot be overemphasized.



Get along with other friendly dogs, including dogs outside the family

Dogs must begin learning their social skills during puppyhood. Play sessions during puppy classes are a great place to start. Continue to socialize your puppy through adolescence, and into adulthood so she can maintain good social skills by being around other friendly dogs.

Off-leash play sessions in safe places are better than those on tight leashes. If the only encounters your puppy has with other dogs is when she's straining at the leash or being threatened by dogs behind fences, she'll quickly learn that other dogs mean either frustration or intimidation for her.

If you want your puppy to be good with cats, birds, horses or other animals, you must socialize her to them as well.

Are at ease with normal, everyday handling

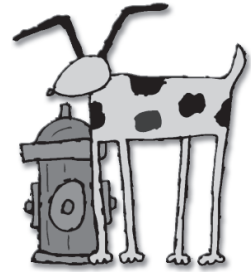
This includes having feet wiped, nails trimmed, mouth opened, and being petted and touched anywhere on the body. Gradually accustom your puppy to these procedures using gentle techniques and lots of "good things" such as tidbits and toys as described later in this book.

Can be left alone for reasonable time periods in the house or yard without becoming anxious or panicked

Gradually accustom your puppy to being alone. Start with short time periods of 10 minutes or so. It is not a good idea to adopt a new puppy one day, and leave for an entire workday the next. If you use a crate for your puppy, you must take the time to gradually acclimate her to it, over several days or a week (refer to Chapter 5).

Relieve themselves only in desired areas

This could be a yard, on leash walks, or even in a doggie litterbox, depending on your living arrangements. Use appropriate housetraining procedures, which do not involve discipline or punishment, and give your dog enough opportunities and suitable locations for relieving herself. (see Chapter 6)



Are not overly fearful of normal, everyday events or new things

This requires socialization, which you'll learn more about later, ideally beginning in puppyhood, to help prevent fear related problems. Do not punish fear-related behaviors, or force your dog to experience what she is afraid of. Instead, let her do things at her own pace with lots of enjoyable enticements such as food and toys.

Can adapt to change with minimal problems

Help your dog be resilient in times of change through training and socialization, and planning for her needs when lifestyle changes such as moving, vacations, or the birth of a baby occur.

Play well with people and other dogs by not becoming uncontrollable or rough

Encourage acceptable play behaviors such as fetching. Even tug of war is OK, as long as your puppy never puts teeth to skin and relinquishes the toy when asked. Do not encourage your puppy to use your body parts as play toys, by batting your puppy around her face, enticing her to chase or nip your fingers, or allowing her to grab your ankles.

Play with their own toys, and are not often destructive

Make sure your puppy has enough toys of different types – some to chew, others to fetch and carry, and others to shake and tug. Consider your puppy's personal preferences for what she likes.

Are content when left in a yard, car or crate for reasonable time periods and do not try to escape or threaten people passing by

Securely contain your puppy on your property using humane methods and do not tie your dog out. Acclimate her to crating and being left alone gradually and encourage friendly, rather than territorial behavior. You'll learn more about how to accomplish these goals as you read through this book.

Reliably respond when told to sit, down, come or stay and can walk nicely on a loose leash

Teach your dog these behaviors using humane training techniques based on positive reinforcement (see Chapter 12). Practice in many different situations, including when your dog is distracted by other things such as wanting to chase a squirrel, so your dog will learn to perform these behaviors no matter where you are.



Bark when appropriate, but not to excess

Barking and other vocalizations are normal communication behaviors for dogs. Provide a quality environment so nuisance barking due to boredom, fear or other reasons does not occur.

Readily relinquish control of food, toys and other objects

Teach your dog that giving up control of these items is a good thing to do because a reward will follow.

Calm down and recover quickly if startled, frightened or excited

Socialization helps prevent dogs from becoming overwhelmed in excitable situations. Encourage your dog to sit or lie down when she becomes too excited, or give her a quick “time out.” Avoid yelling as this only heightens her arousal.



Breed and Individual Differences

The Behaviorally Healthy Dog Criteria apply regardless of your puppy’s breed. Certain behaviors may be easier or more difficult to elicit, depending on your puppy’s breed. It may be easy to teach a Labrador retriever to be friendly, but more difficult to teach her to calm down when excited. It may be just the opposite for an Akita.

Breed tendencies are important, but learning and experience have just as much, if not more, effect on your puppy’s behavior. More accurately, your puppy’s environmental experiences interact with her breed tendencies to determine her behavioral characteristics.