



# BMDCA Info Series

## Thoughts About BMD Puppy Training & Beyond

2011 #22

**Introduction** ► A major part of responsible dog ownership involves planning for and tending to the health and welfare of your new Berner as a puppy and throughout its life. Like children, puppies need effective, well-conceived socialization and training, which will lay the groundwork for a lifetime of learning. As each dog is a unique individual, each will respond differently to training. Evaluation of the dog's physical structure and mental makeup is critical to an owner's effective identification of working/training methods that are in harmony with that individual dog's assets and gifts.

Canine behavior experts recognize that dogs have a sensitive period for learning trust and basic social skills — puppyhood. This doesn't mean you can't teach old dogs new tricks, but puppies are like little sponges — absorbing training at astonishing rates. They also are "programmed" to learn certain skills, especially how to share and play well with others, from birth to about five months of age. Following a well-conceived approach to puppy socialization should produce an adult dog that is adaptable to new situations, obedient, and confident. These qualities help ensure that your Berner puppy will remain a valued family member in your home throughout its life.

**The Benefits of Training Classes** ► A good puppy kindergarten ("puppy K") class, typically for three- to five-month old pups, will help you learn how to communicate with your Berner and provide socialization opportunities. If you have a nearby dog school or club offering puppy K classes, inquire about its curriculum and methodology. Ask about any class you are considering, and listen to the answers with your goals in mind. Many instructors also can help with home-training issues, teach owners how properly to trim or grind nails and clean ears, and introduce the obedience skills that can be fine-tuned later.

They may incorporate a free-play time so that puppies learn dog manners from each other. Above all, puppy K classes need to be **fun and positive**. Some Berners can have a "soft" temperament. The last thing you want is for your sweet, impressionable Berner pup to be thrust into a negative or heavy-handed situation.



**AKC S.T.A.R. Puppy Program** ► Another resource to explore is the AKC **S.T.A.R. Puppy Program**, which focuses on socialization, training, activity, and responsibility. Twenty steps to success are clearly spelled out, divided between owner and dog behaviors, and Pre-Canine Good Citizen® Behaviors. "In classes aimed at earning the AKC S.T.A.R. Puppy distinction,

you'll be able to get information on all of your puppy-raising questions including housetraining, chewing, and the most effective way to teach practical skills such as coming when called. AKC S.T.A.R. Puppy training is a natural lead-in to the AKC® Canine Good Citizen® Program."

[http://www.akc.org/starpuppy/about\\_the\\_program.cfm](http://www.akc.org/starpuppy/about_the_program.cfm) .

### **AKC Canine Good Citizen Program (CGC)** ►

<http://www.akc.org/events/cgc/program.cfm> "The Canine Good Citizen Program is a two-part program that stresses responsible pet ownership for owners and basic good manners for dogs. All dogs who pass the 10-step CGC test may receive a certificate from the American Kennel Club....The Canine Good Citizen Program lays the foundation for other AKC activities such as obedience, agility, tracking, and performance events."

Various CGC tools can be found on AKC's website such as: CGC Program Participant's Handbook, training and testing information, locators for classes and evaluators, and more.

**After AKC's CGC Program** ► After the basics you and your BMD might be interested in exploring other activities that Berner owners and their dogs enjoy such as:

- **Agility\*** [http://www.akc.org/events/cgc/after\\_cgc.cfm?page=4](http://www.akc.org/events/cgc/after_cgc.cfm?page=4)
- **Conformation\***  
<http://www.akc.org/events/conformation/beginners.cfm>
- **Drafting\*** (Carting)
- **Herding\***
- **Obedience\*** [http://www.akc.org/events/cgc/after\\_cgc.cfm?page=3](http://www.akc.org/events/cgc/after_cgc.cfm?page=3)
- **Rally\*** [http://www.akc.org/events/rally/getting\\_started.cfm](http://www.akc.org/events/rally/getting_started.cfm)
- **Therapy Work\***
- **Tracking\*** [http://www.akc.org/events/cgc/after\\_cgc.cfm?page=5](http://www.akc.org/events/cgc/after_cgc.cfm?page=5)

\* also see the related **BMDCA Info Sheets**

Every dog will not be suited for or interested in every sport or event, and young pups SHOULD NOT be expected or allowed to perform activities that are detrimental to growing bodies.

### **Basic Training on Your Own — The First 5 Skills of Focused Socialization** ►

What if there is no puppy K class near you or you want to do more puppy training on your own? Devoting 15 minutes twice a day to focused socialization can help your puppy develop good behaviors.

1. **Being socialized with people:** Early in life, your pup needs to meet and interact with all kinds of people — different shapes, complexions, sizes, ages, and genders. Try to arrange for different people to greet and treat your puppy. Always carry a pocket of treats when with your puppy. Keep the people visits short but pleasant. The goal is for your pup to learn that all kinds of people are friendly and nice. Never

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let your pup be roughed up at this stage, and don't be rough with your young dog (e.g., yelling at the pup to sit). Unpleasant or scary interactions can make your pup fearful of strangers. If your pup is bouncy and still a "shark" with treats, seek people who will work with you to reward the pup gently for sitting or keeping "4 paws on the floor" and taking treats gently. Recruit your letter carrier (even if you must carry your pup out to the truck when it arrives at your mailbox), the neighbors, and meter readers. Seek out (but properly supervise) older kids, little kids, and toddlers. To protect little fingers from puppy teeth, have the youngsters put a treat on the ground. Look for people in hats of all kinds, big coats, boots, sunglasses, slickers, feather boas — any costume you can think of. And, you should "dress up" as well. Invite people to your home to meet your pup. Many puppy K teachers suggest that owners hang out near a grocery store, mall, or other busy "people" stores with a bag of treats. People will come over to see your adorable Berner puppy. Explain that they can help you train by carefully petting and feeding the pup a treat. By repeating this experience for half an hour weekly you will thoroughly socialize your pup to all kinds of people.

2. **Being introduced to dogs and other animals:** First a word of caution — there is a risk of disease transmission for young pups until they have completed their vaccinations. Therefore, it is important to choose your puppy's playmates carefully and avoid public dog parks until your veterinarian confirms that your pup is protected. Nevertheless, puppyhood is a critical time for puppies to socialize, so do not isolate them. Puppies do not know dog manners instinctively. They need play time with other puppies similar in age and tolerant adult dogs so that they learn how to interact properly. Training normally begins in the litter when pups learn how much wrestling is "OK" to keep the game going, not to bite mom too hard, and how to tell littermates they are biting too hard. This education needs to continue when you bring your pup home by arranging play dates with pups of a similar age. Again, a good puppy K class will build this into its structure or help you facilitate play dates with classmates. These need not be lengthy. Fifteen to twenty minutes of free-play at least weekly is useful. Arrange free-play times in a safe, fenced area. Pups will learn impulse control, bite inhibition, and dog social skills, such as how to share toys, invite play, and recognize when someone doesn't want to play. If pups or nearby litter mates are not available as playmates, you can still help your pup by finding a calm, tolerant adult dog that will interact safely.
3. **Being exposed to sounds:** Puppyhood is the ideal time to de-sensitize your pup gradually to many sounds. The goal is for your pup to realize that just because it hears something loud, the sound is not necessarily scary. Many trainers suggest that while you are busy with daily tasks, don't worry about being quiet around your pup — in fact, drop a pan now and then in the kitchen, rattle the dish racks, and let the oven beep. The key is to observe your pup so you learn what frightens it, but do NOT react by comforting or giving the pup attention if it is acting afraid of a sound. Praise the pup that ignores a loud sound, and encourage your pup to approach something that is noisy and check it out. In puppy K class, some instructors will

repeatedly drop a pie pan on the floor and toss "high-value" treats to the pups each time. They may put high-value treats, like a piece of meat, on the "scary" pan for the puppies to approach and eat from. After a few times of tossing the pan and "pairing" it with yummy treats, the pups eagerly run to the pan when it crashes to the floor. This same strategy can help you at home. For example, when thunderstorms begin, use this opportunity to act happy and silly with your pup — feeding yummy treats and playing games with toys. By "pairing" thunderstorms with fun things and great treats, your pup will come to view the loud noises as a cue that the fun is about to begin.

4. **Being introduced to everyday objects:** Surprisingly, this activity may take the most effort. The list of things your puppy should experience and explore between eight weeks and five months of age is huge! In the home, this includes all kinds of appliances, especially the sometimes-scary vacuum cleaner. Pups should not be allowed to bite at or chase this device, mops, brooms, or anything else you do not consider their toys. Let your pup also see you using your hair dryer, electric toothbrush, blender, rolling suitcases, etc. Outside, the pup needs to see bikes, scooters, cars, trucks, and anything else that moves. Also, let the pup safely explore utility boxes, fireplugs, garbage cans, mailboxes, and other objects commonly seen on walks. Take the dog on at least one field trip weekly to a new place. This has the added benefit of exposing the pup to car rides so that it learns to deal with any motion sickness. Visit a pet-friendly store or park, get ice cream together at a stand, explore other people's homes and yards, and make short visits to the vet and groomer. Safely exploring these places will build your pup's confidence and ability to deal with new situations.
5. **Becoming familiar with surfaces:** Before your puppy is five months old, it should have daily opportunities to walk and run safely on a variety of surfaces. Many who adopt older rescue dogs are amazed to find that these dogs often are afraid of grass, concrete, wood floors, or other common surfaces. Sadly, many of these dogs were not given the opportunity to explore these surfaces in puppyhood and, as a result, can be fearful when they experience the unfamiliar. Your puppy needs to walk through tall weeds and on concrete, brick, gravel, sand, asphalt, carpet, wood and vinyl floors, tile, horse arena shavings, dirt, mulch, stones, stairs, ramps, and anything else that comes to mind. The important thing is to expose your pup to these surfaces in a non-threatening and safe manner. Try walking together while feeding treats. Sit down on these surfaces and play games. Once it is clear that your pup has no concerns with a surface, revisit it briefly periodically until the pup is a year old. Set a goal of finding three to five new surfaces a week. A puppy that is well socialized to surfaces should have no trouble confidently accompanying you anywhere.

**Concluding Thoughts ►** Ensuring your Berner receives effective socialization and basic training is part of responsible dog ownership. Should worrisome behavioral or training issues develop, contact your dog's breeder and a professional dog trainer or animal behaviorist for advice.

Portions of this *Info Sheet* are adapted with permission from Stephenson, C. "Congratulations On Your New BMD! Positive Puppy Training." *The Alpenhorn* (Puppies Issue), April 2009, pp 18-22.