

Up to Code - Performance Standards for Pet Dog Training

First written and proposed May 20, 2006 - by Roger Hild

Standards:

The following are offered as desirable standards for each level of pet dog training. These are minimum standards meant to educate the consumer about what he or she should look for and expect when seeking to enroll in pet training programs for the family dog. The actual length of time it can take to complete each level may vary depending on the unique circumstances of each dog and handler, what tools and approaches are employed and any special needs or abilities that must be considered. Nothing in these standards is meant to limit the specific course content or additional topics that may be covered in any individual program. For those who are interested in the backdrop to these standards, there is a background section which follows the standards.

Level 1. Puppy Training. Puppy training is generally regarded to be for puppies less than twenty (20) weeks of age. Four to six lessons would constitute a standard length for a puppy program. A puppy can be considered to have successfully completed Level 1 by accomplishing the following:

- Position changes (Sit, Down and Stand)
- Recall
- Walking nicely on Leash
- Handling
- Stays
- “Leave-it” &/or “Off”
- Accept gentle handling from a stranger

*****How one might assess each skill to determine if the standard has been met:

-Sit, Down and Stand position changes: On a command and/or signal, the handler can get the dog to sit both from a stand and a down. They can also get the dog to down from both a sit and a stand and they can get the dog to stand from both a sit and a down.

-Recall: Handler is able to get the dog to come to them from a distance of twenty feet. On arrival the dog will sit (additional command can be given to get the sit). A helper is permitted to hold the puppy at a distance of twenty feet until the handler calls.

-Walking nicely on Leash: Puppy will remain beside their handler as they walk together for a total distance of thirty meters (about 100 feet). There will be at least two stops during the walk and the puppy will start and stop each time the handler does. During the walk, the leash will be loose at least 80% of the time and puppy will not continually lunge toward any objects on the sidelines.

-Handling: To demonstrate the puppy's willingness to allow himself to be handled, the handler will run their hands over the dog's body. They will pick up and briefly hold each foot, open the

puppy's mouth long enough to quickly look inside and briefly hold each of the puppy's ears. The puppy will show a calm acceptance with minimal resistance to the process.

-Stays: The puppy will hold both a sit stay and a down stay for thirty (30) seconds while the handler remains beside them.

-“Leave-it” &/or “Off”: The puppy will leave an object, he normally would find attractive, alone when told to do so.

-Accept gentle handling from a stranger: The puppy will, without showing resentment, allow the tester to gently pet and briefly handle him.

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**Level 2.** On-leash program. This level is sometimes referred to as basic training or a beginner's class. Dogs will most often begin training in this level at twenty (20) weeks of age or older. Two to six lessons would be a standard length of the program to complete this level. A dog can be considered to have successfully completed Level 2 by accomplishing the following:

-Position changes (Sit, Down and Stand)

-Recall

-Walking on loose leash

-Stays

-“Leave-it” &/or “Off”

-Sit for Examination

\*\*\*\*\*How one might assess each skill to determine if the standard has been met:

-Sit, Down and Stand position changes: On a single command and/or signal, the handler can get the dog to sit both from a stand and a down. They can also get the dog to down from both a sit and a stand and they can get the dog to stand from both a sit and a down. A reliability rate of 75% or better is desired.

-Recall: Handler is able to get the dog to come to them from a distance of fifteen meters (about 50 feet). On arrival the dog will sit (with an additional command if necessary). If necessary, a helper is permitted to hold the dog (by the leash) at a distance of fifty feet until the handler calls.

-Walking on loose leash: Heeling is permitted but not required in this exercise. The dog will remain beside their handler as they walk together for a total distance of One hundred (100) meters (about 350 feet). There will be at least two stops during the walk and the dog must start and stop each time the handler does. During the walk, the leash will be loose at least 80% of the time and the dog will not lunge toward any objects on the sidelines.

-Stays: The dog will hold both a sit stay and a down stay for one minute with the handler standing facing the dog from a distance of twenty feet. He will hold a “stand still” at six feet for one minute. During the stand, the dog is only permitted to move his feet to maintain his balance.

-“Leave-it” &/or “Off”: The dog will leave an object, he normally would find attractive, alone when told to do so.

-Sit for Examination: The dog will, without showing resentment, allow the tester to gently pet him on the head and shoulders while holding a sit stay beside his handler.

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Level 3. Off-leash program. Upon successful completion of a basic program, dog owners may wish to do more advanced training for their pet. An additional two to six weeks/lessons would be a reasonable extension to the basic program. At the conclusion of Level 3 a dog should reliably perform the following:

-Heeling on and off leash

-Recall

-Stays

*****How one might assess each skill to determine if the standard has been met:

Heeling on and off leash: The dog and handler can complete a heeling pattern including all turns (left, right and about) changes of speed, and at least two stops with automatic sits. This pattern, done first on-leash will be repeated off-leash. The dog will never be substantially out of position (more than a leash length away) and will not miss more than one of the automatic sits. As an alternative, the handler may opt to do an on-leash and off-leash walk. For this the dog need not be in the traditional heel position but must remain within three feet of the handler at all times. There will still be all turns, stops and changes of pace. On the two stops the handler can choose what position they want their dog to assume.

Recall: Handler is able to get the dog to come to them from a distance of fifteen meters (about 50 feet). On arrival the dog will sit in front with no additional command. Dog is to be called from a sit stay and must not leave the sit until called.

Stays: The dog will hold both a sit stay and a down stay. The sit stay is for two minutes and the down stay is for four minutes. Both will be done while the handler stands facing the dog from a distance of forty feet. The dog will hold a “stand stay” at six feet for one minute. During the stand, the dog will be briefly touched on the head and back by the tester. The dog should show no signs of resentment.

Background:

Prior to the early 1990’s, for many years, in both Canada and the United States, the standard for basic level skills in dog training was the Novice program. Upon completion of this level, those who chose to test the reliability of their training could run their dog through a series of standardized exercises to evaluate their dog’s trained responses. These exercises were the same ones used to evaluate and award a CD (Companion Dog) title in competitive obedience trials.

Even though many owners chose not to compete in obedience, the results they achieved at the Novice level of training served them well in day-to-day activities with their dog. This is because

in general, at this level, dogs are trained to heel on and off leash, stand still while being examined, come when called and hold both a sit and a down while in a group with other dogs holding the same position. This is a very general description – the actual exercises are still used in competition and can be referenced from one of the various national kennel clubs using the test. The good thing about these standards is the fact that they are uniform, achievable and measurable.

The early 1990's saw the emergence of the "pet dog training" movement and along with that, a number of pet dog trainer associations. Many within this movement based their pet training programs on components from the Novice program while others rejected the notion entirely and chose instead to offer management, play and socialization programs which they relabeled as training. The first causality of the pet dog training movement was consistent, reliable performance standards to which the consumer could refer. The result is that some pet training programs are very good while others are terrible. The fact is however, that even Ian Dunbar (a major force behind the organization of various pet dog training organizations) has identified the lack of consistent, measurable standards as a major weakness within the pet dog training movement.

Not only have standards disappeared, but also there has been no effort to replace them – indeed, there has been a resistance to do so. After nearly fifteen years with no standards, the average pet owner is left with only a vague notion that they should train their dog – they have no notion what that means or how long it should reasonably take. It is not unusual, for instance, for a dog owner to report investing hundreds of dollars and several months of intensive work, only to report they still can't take their dog for a walk or allow it to go for a run off-leash. From the consumers point of view, this lack of performance standards has proven to be a major disservice and they have no way of objectively evaluating all the various options vying for their hard-earned dollars.

The emphasis within the various dog-training associations has been more introspective rather than consumer centered. While the pursuit of trainer certification is a laudable objective, it has also proven to be a bit of a smoke screen as well. While the credentialing might ultimately address the "who" is offering the training, it does not address the "what" can/should the consumer reasonably expect. There are already a large number of well-educated, "credentialed" trainers offering inferior results. This will never change unless we begin to address the expected outcomes (the main reason the consumer contacts a trainer in the first place).

As recently as a week ago, a Google search of, "pet dog training standards," resulted in zero results. The complete absence of any minimum code or performance standards is unacceptable. Any other profession, in addition to setting standards for the credentials of its membership, has codes and standards designed to protect the public they serve. This deficit has recently come to the attention of the IACP (International Association of Canine Professionals) and they have struck a committee to begin developing and hopefully adopting a set of standards similar to what I have posted here. We can only hope that other organizations will follow that lead so that ultimately the public interest is served.

-Roger Hild
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