

Integrative Veterinary Care

Jumping Up

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It is a classic scenario. You enter the room, and your little puppy starts stretching up on his hind legs to greet you, doing that incredibly cute dance. You respond, making eye contact, talking to him, and probably getting down to play with him or pick him up. You are then showered with tiny puppy kisses. What could be cuter than that? We all love it.

For awhile, anyway. Once puppy becomes a 60 pound adult, the dance may still be adorable, but the jumping up part is just plain dangerous. Even if you can withstand the onslaught, what happens when the recipient is the 80-year-old grandma, a 5-year-old-child, or you dressed up for work or a hot date? It's not nearly as cute anymore.

Jumping up may be one of the simplest behaviors to inhibit in a puppy. All you have to do is ignore the behavior you dislike, and reward the behavior you like. Simple, but not easy. How does it work?

The first thing to understand is the motivation behind the puppy jumping up on you. The jumping and face licking is a variation of the puppy submissively greeting a superior. The puppy is supposed to lick the face and lips of elder pack members in greeting, partly to solicit care and partly to demonstrate his diminutive status. The problem for the puppy is our height. We're too tall. He has to work very hard to get to our faces! Thus, the jumping. After a few repetitions, the puppy learns that jumping up on people reliably causes them to give him attention.

Let me repeat that: ***The puppy learns that jumping up on people reliably causes them to give him attention.*** Even making eye contact is attention. No physical contact on your part is necessary to reward the jumping up behavior. If you are looking at the puppy, he has your attention.

With that in mind, think about what behavior you would prefer to see in greeting. The butt-wiggle dance with the jumping deleted would be nice. A sit would be even better. The secret to training this is to ignore the puppy when he is jumping up on you, and give him attention when he is doing something else. At first, we simply settle for no feet on our bodies, whatever that may look like. We can tighten up the criteria later.

A training example would look like this. I walk into the exam room. The puppy is on the floor, checking everything out. He notices me and rushes over, climbing my leg or leaping joyfully as high as possible onto me to make certain that I know he is there. Sometimes back flips are involved. Regardless of the puppy's acrobatic prowess, as long as I feel feet on my leg I keep my face turned away from the puppy and my eyes on the ceiling. The instant that I no longer feel feet on my leg, I make eye contact with the puppy and tell him how brilliant he is as I drop rapidly to one knee and allow him to climb me. After a few seconds, I stand up and make eye contact with the puppy. If he jumps up on me, I exclaim "Oops!" and resume my study of the ceiling. Once the feet are off of me again, I make eye contact, but this time I ask for a little more. As soon as he jumps up on me, usually as I am dropping to one knee, I exclaim "Oops!" again and stand back up, again studying the ceiling. I ask the puppy to keep his feet off of me a little longer – like until my knee hits the floor, rather than when I am halfway down as is usually the case on the first try. It takes a few repetitions, and within 5 minutes I can usually get the puppy to wait until I'm down on my knees before he mobs me, simply by giving him an "Oops!" and removing my attention when he jumps up too soon, and by rewarding him with attention when he controls himself. Within a week, you can have a puppy that only jumps up on invitation by gradually increasing the amount of self-control required to earn attention.

Once you and the puppy have the idea in this type of situation, the technique can be adapted to greeting behavior when you step over a baby gate, when you step into an exercise pen, or to any situation involving the presence of a barrier between you and the puppy. Instead of simply looking away from and ignoring the puppy, you "Oops!" and step back over the gate, out of the pen, or back into the house. After a short "time-out" (literally seconds, just give the puppy enough time to process what happened) try again. You'll be amazed at how quickly he learns to greet you politely.

The next challenge is translating this new skill to other people. The best way to do this is to set up actual training sessions. You will need yummy treats, a harness, a leash, a friend, and an assistant. (The assistant should ideally be someone the puppy sees often.) You handle the puppy. Your assistant handles the guest. Set the puppy up inside the front door, ideally 15-20 feet away from it. Place your foot on the leash so that the puppy has just enough leash to sit comfortably but will be restrained if he tries to jump up. (This is to prevent any accidentally rewarding leaping episodes.) As long as your puppy has "four on the floor," tell him how wonderful he is and give him occasional treats. As soon as the front feet come off of the floor, exclaim "Oops!" Your job is to focus on the puppy. Once he has four-on-the-floor again, resume your litany of how brilliant and wonderful he is.

Your assistant gets to handle the guest, who has been given a description of the exercise. As long as you are telling the puppy how wonderful he is, the guest can approach, making eye contact. The instant you exclaim "Oops!" your guest is to turn and face the door. Your assistant's job is to ensure that this happens, by physically turning the guest by the shoulders if necessary. As soon as you resume telling the puppy how brilliant he is, the guest may turn back and continue approaching. As soon as the guest gets to your puppy, they may drop to one knee and you may take your foot off of the leash and allow your puppy to mob them. You may elect to pre-load your guest with treats, so the treats may be offered in a loosely-closed fist to divert the puppy from jumping up as the guest pets the puppy. (Petting should be a chest scratch or long strokes down the body, always done slowly, to minimize excitement.)

After 15 or 20 guests, you should have pretty good greeting behavior.

This exercise is, of course, best started when you first get your puppy. If you wait until the jumping-up behavior has been rewarded many times, the technique still works. It just takes longer.