



Class Act or Stand Up?

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For many people and dogs, going to a dog training class once a week is as much a fun, social occasion as it is about training. There is little doubt that, done properly, a good training class can offer opportunities for socialisation, and the chance to practise training techniques against the distractions of other dogs. However, for some owners a training class is the last place they should consider trying to teach their dog new skills!

For many dogs, going to a training class is full of surprises. Just think about it from his point of view. There you are on a Thursday evening. The dog expected you to come in from work, take off your shoes and eat your dinner while watching TV. Not tonight! Instead, you come home, rush to eat something, change your shoes, grab your dog's lead and head for the door with your car keys in hand. Is it a walk? You go in the car, but don't seem to be heading for the vets. You arrive at a strange hall, with lots of unusual noises coming from it. The acoustics are strange. There are lots of other dogs and people, but this is clearly not the park - and not only that but your owner is behaving in a very odd manner! Any dog would be likely to be bewildered, wouldn't it?

For the vast majority of dogs, attending well-run classes, this weird scenario is one that they simply get used to. Over a number of visits, the dog learns that good things happen at the class. There are treats, and the other dogs are friendly and don't sit too close. Once they start focusing on doing the exercises, and the rewards that are on offer, they - and their owner - settle down and forget about being nervous.

However, there are some for whom the fear of the environment or the proximity of the other dogs never subsides.

Imagine that you are a little afraid of spiders. On its own, a single, tiny money spider is OK. As long as you can get some distance between yourself and it, then you are both fine. However, the closer the spider gets, or the bigger it is, the more you start to experience anxiety. This stress would be multiplied ten-fold if you were asked to touch the spider, or if there was more than one in close proximity. So it is with some dogs.

If your dog is a little worried by the presence of another dog in the park, even if it is some distance away, how do you think he or she will feel in a hall full of strange dogs, with no place to run and nowhere to hide? Do you think he will be able to concentrate on you, or learn new exercises? Frankly, this would be like putting a human who is phobic about spiders into a room chock full of them, and then expecting them to learn a complex skill, such as learning a new language or programming a computer.

A good instructor should be on the alert to spot dogs that are experiencing stress in a training class environment, because owners may miss the more subtle signs, or misinterpret them. For example, many dogs get labelled as 'naughty' because they are barking and lunging at other dogs – but this should be understood to be a coping strategy that the dog is using because he or she is stressed – not just because he's being disobedient.

It's almost impossible to learn new behaviours while under stress, and this is true for both people and dogs. However, it's all too easy to reinforce these sorts of coping strategies – which means the dog starts to display similar behaviours when out and about – thus making the training class the cause of a behaviour problem and not the cure.

While some symptoms of stress are easy to spot, others can be subtle, and it's important that they are taken seriously and addressed, before damage is done.

Signs of possible stress in dogs in class

- Frequent yawning and panting
- Barking
- Lunging, leaping and jumping up
- Hiding under the chair
- Tail between legs, and ears back
- Sweaty paws
- Blood-shot eyes
- Shedding hair
- Refusing food
- Refusing to move
- Urinating

In some cases, a gentle intervention in the class may be enough to arrest the stress and to settle the dog into a calmer state so that he or she can start to learn. Moving the dog to a different position in the room, using an outdoor area for training, increasing motivation and reducing pressure can all help. However, there are occasions where the class environment just simply doesn't suit a certain dog, or owners. At these times, one-to-one training can offer far more in the way of learning opportunity, and value for money. The advantages of one-to-one training can include whole family attendance - at a time that suits - as well as giving an chance to deal with context-specific problems in the home and out on walks. One-to-one training with a good instructor is a bit like having a personal trainer. There is far more attention to detail, and you will both know just how much homework you have done from visit to visit!

In these days of individual, personalised help, one-to-one training can offer a powerful alternative, or adjunct, to training classes. On the down-side it does not offer the same chance to work your dog with the distraction of other dogs alongside, but this needs to be balanced

against the dog's current level of training and the ultimate goals.

All in all, the style of training you choose needs to suit you and your dog. If you are a social butterfly, and your dog is calm around other dogs, enjoys their company and needs to work alongside them to improve his or her responses, then a class could be just the thing. On the other hand, if confidence or motivation are an issue, then why not try some one-to-one coaching – even if this a prior to joining a class. Alternatively, if you're really keen, why not try both?