

When To Start Agility Training With Your Puppy: Insights For A World Champion

Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

Transcript

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The sport of dog agility is an awesome one for dogs of all shapes and sizes and handlers of all shapes and sizes. The most common question I get about the sport is how do I know when my puppy is ready to start doing dog agility? That's the topic of today's podcast episode and spoiler alert, the answer is probably going to surprise everybody.

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Hi, I'm Susan Garrett. Welcome to Shaped by Dog. You know, dog agility is fast. It's fun. The dogs get great exercise, but there's more to the sport than there first appears. Yes, the dogs go over jumps and in tunnels and they weave poles and people say, "Well, I just want to do it for fun so I don't need to know what you as a world champion would be doing with your dogs."

But the truth is just as with anything, the more you learn, the easier the sport becomes and the safer it is for both you and your dog. Most people, when asked, when is it a good time to start doing agility with a puppy would say, "Well, it depends on when the puppy's growth plates are closed."

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I personally have never cared when my puppy's growth plates are closed because that is not a deciding factor for me. I think more importantly than growth plates, is how physically strong the soft tissues, the things that support those bones, the muscles, the ligaments, the tendons.

You know, there's a lot of small dogs whose growth plates could be closed by six or seven months, but the puppy doesn't have the supporting musculature to do anything that is taxing on that body. So then what is it? Is it the breed of dog? Yeah, that could have an impact because bigger dogs grow a lot longer and they mature a lot slower.

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Mental maturity, physical maturity, all of those things are important for things that are very stressful on a dog's body. Things like teaching them weave poles, having them running across a full height dog walk, teaching them how to go over an A frame because so many dogs when they hit an A frame with speed that has a lot of impact on the dog.

So, those skills, I don't believe anybody should introduce their puppy to those types of skills before they're 14 to 16 months of age or older. But let's talk about handling. Having a dog go over a few jumps. Surely that can't matter, right? When can we do that?

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Now, let me preface this by saying in the 90s, I started doing flyball, competing in the sport of flyball with my puppies when they were nine months old. Now as crazy and outlandish as that sounds, I'm going to tell you that all of those dogs lived a very long life, well into their teens. They didn't have limps and gimps.

They weren't horribly arthritic, and they were playing a sport where they sprinted and smashed into a box, not with the level of grace we have with dogs now. But had to tight turn in the small surface of a flyball box and speed back to the handler.



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Now, it doesn't make sense that we would do that to nine-month-old puppies today. And I will say the sport of flyball takes a lot longer before they introduce the sport to dogs. Most of them are well over the age of a year before they even start doing any serious training.

My point is what people say is the reason we shouldn't start agility dogs young because they're going to have a short career, [they're going to get injured](#). That may not be necessarily true. We don't know that for sure. There is no science studies to support the age.

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Common sense has got to come into play. But for me, the most important deciding factor before you should start thinking about teaching your dog how to go over jumps and follow you on a little agility course, the most important factor. It comes down to two things.

It is number one, the foundation that you have. I'm talking about [your relationship with your dog](#). If you were to take your dog off leash, would they look for something else to reinforce them? Or would they look to you to reinforce them? That's a great indicator of reinforcement.

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If there's other dogs running around, would your dog be deaf to you? Or would they want to play with you? That is the most important thing. Our Recallers program, I'm always promoting because that's what builds an amazing relationship. So, relationship, number one, before I would consider doing any agility skills.

Number two would be the recall. Yes, it goes hand in hand. A dog with a great relationship with their owners often has an amazing recall away from distraction. Why? Because they have so much value running to their owners. So, can you call your dog out of play? If not, that's what you should be working on. Not focusing on how to get your dog to run a course in agility.

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And this, honestly, it doesn't matter what your goals are in agility. If you put in a solid foundation, you have more success, the dog stays safe, and the dog has more fun. It is possible for you to have fun in agility and your dog not having fun. I've seen it happen.

Dogs are walking, they're leaving the course, they're looking for other things to do. It's a sign they are not finding joy where you are finding joy. Having a solid foundation ensures that the dog is having fun as well.

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So, relationship, recall, retrieve, because the sport of dog agility, we need to get the dogs working away from us. Unless you can outrun your dog and if you can outrun your dog, either you're an Olympic level sprinter or your dog's not running that hard because they're just not enjoying what you're doing. So having a toy or even a food bowl that your dog will reliably race out, pick it up, and bring it back to you, that's an important foundation skill before you consider growing agility skills.

The fourth foundational piece is what I call [Reinforcement Zone](#). That is the area on either hip. On both. It's not just one. It isn't just heel position on your left. It's both sides that your dog will drive into either side because that's what handling is. Your dog is turning when you turn. That if you turn into the dog, they'll turn the opposite way. That all comes from having a solid Reinforcement Zone. Off leash your dog, you can run in a big circle and your dog will stay on your side.



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That is critical to your dog's understanding of the handling that goes into agility because agility handling is everything. Yes, it's great if the dog has the skills, they know how to weave, they know how to do a contact obstacle, they know how to properly execute the jumping that we're going to ask them to do.

But the bottom line is they have to know how to follow your motion and follow your words, the verbal cues you give to the dog when they are running an agility course. Now, related to those verbal cues is early on, we want to teach our young puppies verbal discriminations. So, I can hold out a toy in front of a 12-week-old puppy and then tell them to tug and they'll tug but I might tell them to down or sit or spin and not tug.

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They have verbal discriminations that leads to the dog being able to quickly discriminate between a cue of take a tunnel versus take a jump. That is gold when you finally get able to do agility with your dogs. You want them to discriminate between all of the verbal cues you use. And I have 20 verbal cues that are just handling related.

They aren't even things like weaves or contacts. They're just handling related cues. The language that I use with my own dogs. So, getting that verbal discrimination with your family pet is awesome as a foundation for sport, but it's also awesome to help build that relationship between you and your dog.

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Of course, having a rock-solid stay, which we grow from Crate Games, all in a game. So, it isn't a position of punishment, it's a position of joy that contributes to the overall success you have in agility because you get to lead out and go where you want as a handler.

And of course, I don't want to ignore all of the great family pet skills, the socializing your puppy, the ability to relax and do nail trims and all of those things should come before you start focusing on, 'I want to handle my dog in agility.'

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So, there's a lot of skills that for most people might take well over a year to really get to a comfortable level. But if you were a world champion agility trainer like me, you might be able to accomplish all of that foundation by the time the puppy's four, five, or six months old. Does that mean you can go out and start running agility courses with your puppy?

Well, that's an individual decision, but personally, I say no. I say there is a hierarchy that we grow towards. And even if you've got the vast majority of your foundation done, that puppy still mentally needs growing. There's a lot of things like [fitness that we can do with our dogs](#) that help them be better when we get doing agility.

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Puppy grids that we use jump bumps and help them to read distances all focus a lot of my attention on those things. But then when my puppy's five months old, possibly a little younger, possibly a little older, I will start introducing verbal cues over one jump.

When I say possibly a little younger, possibly a little older, it really depends on the dog. For example, my youngest puppy Prophet, by the time he was five months old, I was teaching him cues over one jump. In contrast, [my three-year-old dog This!](#), she wasn't at a place that I could introduce those cues until she was well over a year old and I really didn't grow them until she was over two years old.



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She was a very special circumstance. And so, you don't take the timeline I'm saying and saying, "Right, now my dog can do this." We have our foundation skills. Then we consider the dog in front of us, what that dog's needs are. Then we can start growing their discrimination on one jump.

For me, when do we actually start running a course or running a sequence? It comes down to frequency and intensity. So, frequency, how often do you plan on running sequences with this puppy? Is it every day? I'd say that probably should be a no. Every week, for me, a five month or six-month-old puppy shouldn't be doing sequencing every week.

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I start my puppies around six or seven months with a simple two or three jump sequence that doesn't involve anything too outrageous. There's no backsides, there's no slicing of jumps. It's just simple soft turns and maybe a tunnel. The frequency also contributes to when you grow that sequencing.

And I'll share with you what I think is the ideal frequency a little later. But the intensity, the intensity of the exercise. So, getting a dog to wrap a cone multiple times, that's very intense. So, that's not something I would do with a three-month-old puppy. The height you're asking a puppy to jump also impacts the intensity.

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We want to keep things low intensity. That means I'm not going to put any height on a jump. Mostly I'll use jump bumps with puppies, and I'll go maybe ankle height when they get to be six months old with a bar when I introduce a bar. The number of repetitions also impacts the intensity.

So, if you do one jump two or three times, that's very different than doing one jump 20 or 30 times. So, keeping the intensity low. And the final and the most important thing that affects the intensity on that puppy is the expertise of the handler doing the training.

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Therefore, somebody who is an elite world champion handler, they will have far more success handling any sequence two or three obstacles or four or five obstacles than somebody who's brand new to the sport. They're going to be focused on maybe where they're going, or they won't know how to split their attention between watching the dog and knowing where they're going.

They won't know where the dog should be taking off. They don't know how to stay out of their dog's way. Heck, a lot of novice handlers end up in their dog's way. And that's what creates a loss of confidence in the dog and puts the dog potentially in an injurious position. Frequency and intensity. The intensity really is dictated by the experience level of the handler.

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Which is why when I put a post up of my dog doing a four or five jump sequence, when he's 10 months old, people will go, "Oh my gosh, you shouldn't be doing that!" But you don't know the frequency that I'm doing it at, nor do you know the intensity that I'm doing it at. And the fact that I've been competing at a world championship level in the sport of dog agility for more than 30 years has a huge impact on that intensity.

It's almost like if anybody, like myself, a world championship level handler does anything with their puppy and posts it to social media, we should put a disclaimer. 'This should not be attempted by people who aren't competing at a world championship level.' But that sounds so elitist.



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So, what happens is most of us don't post anything that we're doing with young dogs because we don't want people to try to mimic what we do. So, frequency of how often it gets done, for me with my puppies, I might do anything around a jump once a week. But when I start sequencing, which is usually not before seven months, I'll do two or three obstacles. Maybe once or twice at the most a month.

There's so many other things. Jump grids are what my obsession is at that age or fitness. When I say fitness, I mean intentional fitness where we're working on strengthening a dog's body, but equally, or maybe even more important is what I call forest fitness.

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And that is the dog running off leash, running over roots of trees, running in our field that's uneven surfaces. That's where they start to get proprioception and the understanding of balance and where to put their feet. With the growth of intentional fitness and all of the sexy things people do in the fitness classes, sometimes that forest fitness falls by the wayside, but it's just so important.

So, the dog's fitness level, that has an impact on how much intensity their body absorbs. So, for me, my puppies, when I get that great foundation of the relationship and the recall and the retrieve and the Reinforcement Zone, and all of those good things that make a great family pet, I'm then focused on fitness and jump grids.

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And I'll sprinkle a little bit of sequencing in. As the puppy gets older, I might do a little bit more. So, Prophet now is 11 months old. I might do handling with him once a week at this point. And I might do as many as seven or eight obstacles. It's dictated on the success he has.

If my puppy is not having success with me trying a sequence, then he's telling me the skills aren't where I thought they'd be at. And here's what happened. He was doing great doing sequencing of four or five obstacles at nine months. But now at 11 months, he's getting more excited for the game. So, he's getting wide on places and running around obstacles.

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So, I need to go back to that three or four obstacle set. I don't want my puppy to rehearse mistakes. And that's why if you don't have experience of knowing dog's line and being able to handle 100 percent clean, you shouldn't be attempting to run sequences with a puppy.

Wait until your dog's fully grown up as a two-year-old dog or older, if they're a large breed, and then work with a qualified agility expert. Finally, agility is a phenomenal sport for all fit dogs. But don't be in a hurry to start doing agility.

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All of those fun, like the foundation, let's call them fundamentals because they should be fun for both of you when you're training them, will make agility so easy for you if you take your time and not be in a hurry to get out running courses.

And if you go to a class where they say it's okay to put puppies on equipment, I suggest otherwise. Now, before you leave, I mentioned I have 20 different verbal cues that my puppies learn to discriminate one from the other in order to handle agility. They are cues that tell the dog how to take an obstacle and where to go after.





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If you would like to know exactly what those cues are, [I've put together an eBook](#) and you can find it in the description of this podcast episode that will help you understand a little bit about the complexity of agility.

Don't be afraid. I don't introduce my puppies to all 20 at once. It's all about keeping a puppy safe, growing their confidence. And trying to add 20 discriminations at one time will never grow any puppy's confidence.

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But having a strong foundation absolutely will. I hope this all makes sense. And I hope you take the opportunity to introduce your dog to agility in a way that grows their confidence and fun. I'll see you next time right here on Shaped by Dog.

Download Your Free eBook:

[Susan Garrett's Agility Cues eBook](#)

Resources:

[Podcast Episode 186: 2 Types Of Connection With Dogs: Dog Agility And Daily Life Case Studies](#)

[YouTube Video: Understanding Your Dog's Reinforcement Zone \(RZ\) with Susan Garrett](#)

[YouTube Playlist: Exercising Your Dog's Body and Mind: Tips and Games with Susan Garrett](#)

[Podcast Episode 206: First Dog Agility Competition: Creating Joy For This! By Maximizing Reinforcement](#)

[Podcast Episode 114: Dog Agility Training: 3 Big Mistakes All Dog Owners Should Avoid](#)



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About Susan

A world-leading educator of dog trainers, Susan is also one of the most successful agility competitors of the last three decades. She has won multiple Gold Medals at National or World Championship events with every dog she has ever owned over the past 30 years. Susan was one of the very first dog trainers to share knowledge online when she opened her "Clicker Dogs" website many years ago. Susan has helped hundreds of thousands of people enjoy a great relationship with their dogs through her workshops and keynote speaking around the world, award winning books, DVDs, magazine articles, blog posts, podcasts, free dog training and dog agility video series, and online dog training programs.



A natural teacher and an entertaining speaker, Susan is world renowned for her dog training knowledge and practical application of that knowledge. Her understanding of how to apply science-based learning principles to both competitive and family pet dog training has been pivotal in changing how dogs are trained.

Susan is now helping many thousands of dog owners in 82 countries have the best relationship possible with their dogs. The real joy for her comes from bringing confidence to dogs and their owner through playful interactions and relationship building games that are grounded firmly in the science of how animals learn.



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