

Agility, obedience and socialisation for dogs

A fun way to spend time and a necessity, too!

Gabriela Wehrli

Many BIS expats have mentioned to me that during their first few weeks in Switzerland, they noted with surprise that dogs are allowed not only on trains, trams and buses, but also inside restaurants. They also remark how well behaved most of the dogs are.

In Switzerland, during the second half of the last century, the relationship between dogs and their owners changed drastically. Most dogs were no longer working dogs. They didn't have to guard cattle or protect a home or an industrial area. Like cats, dogs made their way from outside and around the house into our cellars and then steadily into our living rooms and onto our sofas – and in extreme cases even into their owners' beds. Dogs have become family members. Similar to parents with their children, dog owners want to raise and educate their pets so that they can make it in modern society. Dogs are expected to know basic commands, behave on public transport and manage social interaction both amongst themselves and with humans. For dogs, this is a challenge.

Hundreds of dog sports clubs have been founded over the last 40 years, and their membership numbers are increasing. By participating in these clubs you can get serious training and participate in competitions. The specialisations are wide-ranging and include obedience, agility, trailing and many more. However, if you are into it more for the fun, you can join a "hobby group" that does not participate in competitions. Most dogs really enjoy the work and the challenge. Let's not forget



Our dog Pico



Photos: Gabriela and Thomas Wehrli

that the vast majority of dogs were originally bred for a specific purpose (hunting, guarding, shepherding, guiding, pulling, etc). Therefore, most family dogs are mentally and sometimes also physically understimulated.

As noted above, dogs in Switzerland are generally very well behaved. Unfortunately, there's always the exception to the rule. After a tragic incident in December 2005 when a six year-old boy was attacked by three pit bulls and died from his injuries, polemic discussions about dogs started all over Switzerland. What could be done to protect people? Should certain breeds be banned completely? Should owners have to pass a test before being allowed to have a dog? Who should be tested, the owner or the dog? If the owner was to be tested, how would families be handled? Would every family member have to take the test? Would those who didn't take the test or who failed it no longer be allowed to let their dog off the leash? Who should be doing the testing? What should be done about all the people who already had dogs: should they all be asked to take a test, too? What about smaller dog breeds which are not really "dangerous", but can still bite? The list of questions was endless.

Highly emotional and not always sensible debates were held. Everybody was suddenly an expert. Shelters were flooded with dogs, because their owners were scared of the future. And hardly any dogs were adopted from shelters – if you wanted a dog, it was safer to get a puppy. After all, if you adopt a dog from a shelter, you don't know what you're getting. In 2007/08, the Schweizerische Kynologische Gesellschaft put together a voluntary test for dog owners. It was not clear if this test would become mandatory, but many dog owners took it voluntarily.

In parallel, under pressure from the media and the public, some cantons created their own new regulations. Everybody was extremely confused. It was not clear if you could still walk your dog without a muzzle in one canton, but could do so without in the neighbouring canton. If you wanted to take your dog on a trip, you had to read up on the canton's laws beforehand, in order to know what was allowed and what was not. To take your pet along on a hike that would take you through several cantons was simply impossible.

Finally, in September 2008, Switzerland enacted a new law for dog owners. The most important points are summarised in the box at the end of this article. These general regulations are valid in all of Switzerland. Unfortunately, there are still additional cantonal laws, as well as special regulations for certain breeds. Therefore, it's always wise to check with your Gemeinde what the specific regulations are.

I want to continue on a positive note, though, because a well behaved and socialised dog can add much joy to your life. Training your dog can be lots of fun and help you stay fit (mentally as well as physically) at the same time. We participate regularly in a dog sports group on Saturday afternoons. This is what our typical one-hour lesson looks like:

First 10 minutes: Warm-up. This includes walking your dog (heeling) on a loose leash. Everybody has to cross the paths of others as closely as possible, while the dogs should be focused solely on their owner, not on other people or their dogs. Sometimes we form a big circle and one dog-owner pair at a time has to walk a slalom around all the others. All the warm-up exercises are to relax the dog, get it used to the other dogs and let it know that it has to concentrate on its owner, no matter what happens around it.



5 minutes: To socialise the dogs and reward them for the good work, all dogs are let off the leash. They are allowed to play and run around. This is an excellent opportunity for them to build up their social behaviour and build self-confidence in interaction with other dogs.

40 minutes: We form two to three smaller groups and train obedience and agility. Obedience means the dog should: heel nicely on and off the leash; sit, lie down or stand still on command; be able to sit and wait for the owner even if the owner disappears out of the dog's sight; pass groups of people without sniffing them, jumping on them or showing any signs of



fear; etc. Agility is the most fun bit for the dogs as well as their owners. Most dogs love the jumps. The tunnels are more challenging depending on whether they are laid out straight or with a curve, so that the dogs cannot see the exit on the other side. The slalom looks very easy, but is actually quite tricky to manoeuvre through without missing a pole. You can do agility slowly, so that the dog, after every challenge, has to walk at your heel again. This is challenging, especially for the over-enthusiastic dogs. You can also do agility faster: the challenge here is that your dog is faster than you, so you have to do a lot of running. The goal would be for you to position yourself more or less in the centre of the course and give your dog visual and vocal commands, so that the dog can manoeuvre through the course at its own speed. If ever you see an agility event taking place nearby, go watch it – it's amazing how well certain dog-human teams communicate and work together.

Last 5 minutes: To end the training and reward the dogs for all their hard work, they are usually let off the leash again to play around and work out any tension they built up during the hour. Some dogs can get very hyper, so these last five minutes mean a lot to them.

Our coaches, Toni and his helpers Andrea, Claudia and Karin, are very experienced dog trainers. They always explain the reason for every exercise and how it will help in a day-to-day situation.

Toni is approached quite regularly for help by owners of problematic dogs. The problems range from aggressive behaviour to extreme fear of humans or other dogs. For these owners, it's important to find a group of other owners and dogs to train with – because how can you treat, for example, aggression against other dogs, if no other dogs are willing to train with you? It's always amazing and rewarding to see how much improvement can be achieved if you're willing to go the extra mile. We've had dogs join our group and everybody was sceptical about whether improvement could still be achieved – and it could.

Finally, the social element for the owners is also important. We can always have something to drink in the club house, and we meet once a year for a Christmas dinner.

New Swiss laws and regulations: summary of the most important info for dog owners

Registering your dog / dog passport

In Switzerland it is obligatory to register your dog with your Gemeinde and to have it microchipped. For travel to neighbouring countries, you need a dog passport and certain vaccinations. Talk to your vet to find out what you need.

Obligatory courses

Dog owners must take a theoretical course as well as a training. The theoretical course is for first-time dog owners only. It takes at least four hours. The training is obligatory for anyone who adopted their dog after 1 September 2008. It consists of four one-hour sessions.

Is there a test at the end of the training sessions?

No, there will be no test for the theoretical course or for the training. However, if trainers realise that owners don't have their dogs under control, the cantonal veterinary office can make owners take further training. This is already the case today.

Does every dog (regardless of size or breed) have to take the training?

Yes.



Relaxed and happy after the training



Concentrated and attentive

Overview: who needs to do what?			
	Dog adopted before 1.9.2008	Dog adopted between 1.9.2008 and 1.9.2010	Dog adopted after 1.9.2010
Dog owners who have previously owned a dog	No training necessary	Must have taken the training by 1.9.2010 or within a year after getting the dog	Must have taken the training within a year after getting the dog
First-time dog owners	No training necessary	Must have taken the theoretical course and the training by 1.9.2010 or within a year after getting the dog	Must have taken the theoretical course before buying the dog, and the training within a year after getting the dog

