

Bonding and Training your Livestock Guardian Dog Puppy

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Overview

Bonding and early training are critical to the success of livestock guardian dogs (LGDs) in ranching settings. Data collected by Texas A&M AgriLife¹, as well as extensive personal experience with LGDs, suggest that dogs bonded just after weaning on-ranch with the livestock they'll be protecting are more likely remain with stock than dogs bonded by a breeder and purchased at an older age. This bonding process should begin when the LGD pup is 8-10 weeks of age.

Observation and Supervision

During the bonding process, the pup should be observed on a regular basis from a distance for evidence of prey drive, submissive behavior towards livestock, and a calm temperament. While some things like chasing stock can be corrected if dealt with sternly and immediately, other things like dominant behavior towards livestock is more difficult to change in a pup. If this is continually seen in the pup, then you may need to choose a new puppy to bond to your livestock. Pups tend to be easily excited when humans are with them, but when observed from a distance, they should slowly approach livestock and remain calm unless they are alerted to a predator or unknown animal at their location.



- **Prey Drive:** watch for stalking behavior, as well as chasing or biting the livestock. If you do observe this behavior, correct it by saying “NO” in a gruff voice. As the pup matures, it should not exhibit these behaviors at all.
- **Submissive Behavior:** The pup will likely be curious and somewhat cautious at first around livestock. Appropriate submissive behaviors include avoiding eye contact with the livestock, walking (rather than running) when approaching them, dropping to the ground or rolling over when near them, lowering the head and tail, licking at the mouths of the livestock, and choosing to sleep next to them.
- **Calm Temperament:** While you should try to select a pup (see ***Selecting a Livestock Guardian Dog Puppy***) with a calm temperament, you should watch for some specific behaviors once the pup is with livestock. The pup should not be overly aggressive, fearful, shy, or clingy; they should also not be overly excited to see people. Handlers should remain somewhat aloof during their initial interactions with the pup. Watch for them to walk off by themselves after greeting you or being fed.

¹ Costanzo, B., LGD Bonding & Early Training Procedures. Texas A&M AgriLife (in press).

Bonding with Other Dogs

Some producers have success placing a pup with an older dog or bonding littermates at the same time; however, this technique can result in a pup that is bonded more with other dogs than with livestock. Similarly, limit the interaction of a new pup with your herding or pet dogs. The early focus of the bonding process should be socialization with livestock.



The Bonding Pen

Keeping your pup contained with livestock is crucial to the bonding process. A woven wire or electro-net fence that the pup cannot go under or through will help keep them with livestock. The initial bonding pen should be no larger than an acre to ensure that the pup and the livestock interact. Once this initial phase is concluded, you can place your pup with livestock in a larger paddock – again, the pup should not be able to go through, under, or over the fence.

You may also wish to construct a smaller “safe” pen within the bonding pen for the pup to get away from the livestock if they need to. Initially, the pup should be fed outside of this safe pen, preferably when the livestock are fed and in close proximity to them, so that they aren’t able to avoid the livestock at all times. Eventually, you may wish to place an automatic feeder in this safe pen (which will keep the livestock from eating the dog food). You should also watch to make sure the pup (and not the livestock) is eating the dog food.

If the livestock are too rough with your pup, try different livestock. Similarly, if the pup starts being too rough, older livestock may help teach the pup to be submissive and respectful.

Puppy Care Checklist

Daily

- ❑ Feed pup twice a day for the first 4-6 months. Feed a high quality, large-breed puppy food for the first year. After the first year, switch to a large-breed adult food. Feed per label instructions for the size of the pup.
- ❑ Make sure the pup has access to clean water. Eventually, they’ll want to drink out of (and get in) the livestock watering trough, but make sure a small pup can get water at all times.

Weekly

- ❑ 2-3 times a week, spend 5-10 minutes socializing the pup to humans. Rub your hands all over the dog, especially his feet. Place your fingers inside his mouth to check tooth development. Check ears for ticks and infections. Brush the pup if possible.

After First Month

- ❑ Begin teaching basic commands. The pup should know their name and come when called. They should also know the meaning of “No!” ***Always make sure any and all positive reinforcement (praise, etc.) is done in an area with livestock!***

- ❑ Begin leash and tether training the pup. Leash training should start out slowly (maybe 2-3 minutes at a time) until they will walk without pulling away from you. Tether training is important in case they ever get caught in a snare. Tethering is also useful when working livestock or doing other activities where the dog might get in the way.
- ❑ Teach the pup to ride in the pick-up truck and stock trailer. Early on, the pup should learn to ride in the cab of the truck or in a crate. As they grow, they can be taught to ride in the back of a pick-up and in the trailer. Sometimes a pup will be more comfortable riding in a stock trailer with livestock.

After 4-6 Months

Place pup with adult livestock in a pasture/rangeland setting. Move the shelter/feeding station into this new setting, as well. Encourage the pup through positive reinforcement to remain with livestock. Potential risks at this stage may include roaming behavior, play behavior (chasing livestock), and desire to be with people rather than livestock. Observe this transition closely to ensure that the pup is attentive and submissive to stock, trustworthy around them, and attentive to their environment.

Veterinary Care and Vaccinations

The pup should have their first vaccinations before you receive them. Consult with your local veterinarian about scheduling necessary booster shots and rabies vaccination, as well as any area-specific vaccinations. Your veterinarian will also have recommendations about appropriate internal and external parasite control for your area.

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