16 Springer Spaniel Training Mistakes

Mistake: Not redirecting bad behaviour

Tip: Give your dog a toy instead

Scolding your dog and taking away what you don’t want them to have isn’t teaching them anything except that, in their eyes, you’re a bit mean. Show them what you do want them to do instead by giving them a suitable toy or chew. If you’re not consistent in showing them your preferred action, they will have a harder job learning what it is that you do want from them.

Mistake: Acknowledging bad behaviours

Tip: Recognise good behaviour with a tasty treat

It’s easy for us to fall into the trap of not putting in the effort to reward the behaviour we do like and start telling our dogs off but this will only damage the relationship you have with your dog. Even without formal training sessions we can reward our dogs when they are settled on their bed, sitting nicely, walking to heel – capture the moment of good behaviour and give your dog a treat to let them know they’ve done well.

Mistake: Not giving your dog enough mental stimulation

Tip: Engage their brains with a puzzle toy treat dispenser

Springers weren’t designed to do little all day. They need to use their brains and the more they are encouraged to do so, the happier they will become. Get off to the right start by keeping things simple and easy for your dog to solve at first, and don’t be afraid to encourage and interact with the toy yourself if your dog seems hesitant to use it.

Mistake: Not letting your dog sniff on walks

Tip: Set aside time for special sniffy walks

Springers were bred to use their noses. In fact, every dog out there is guided around the world by using its nose. Allowing a dog to use its nose more freely can help them live the life they were made for and improve their welfare, health and happiness. We take our dogs on dusk and dawn sniffy walks which allows them to wake up and calm down naturally. You might use a long leash for this activity and allow them to roam and sniff freely. If you must keep them on a shorter leash, be sure to slow down and encourage sniffing so that it’s less about moving and more about sniffing. Be patient and keep working at it if it doesn’t go quite the way you planned at first.

Mistake: Letting your puppy jump up at you

Tip: Train an alternative behaviour with treats

Once we allow our puppies to jump up, we encourage them to jump up for attention as adults. If we teach them things like ‘all four on the floor’ gets them what they want, or ‘sit’ and the fuss will come, we encourage more socially acceptable behaviour in our adult dogs.

Mistake: Using a retractable leash to leash train

Tip: Use a longer leash with a consistent length

A retractable leash has its uses for sniffy walks in an open area or similar, but their inconsistent length makes them unsuitable to be used on road/pavement walks. If you are trying to teach your dog to stop pulling, you’ll have a harder job because the dog is able to walk at varying distances away from you at any given time. Lead length consistency is going to assist you in your efforts with leash training.

Mistake: Allowing your springer to get bored

Tip: Provide them a regular and consistent enriching activity

Springer spaniels are hunting dogs. These dogs were bred to work for 6-8 hours per day, and that includes using their noses and interacting with their handler. With this in mind, nose work can be the perfect activity for your springer spaniel. Nose work can be done simply for fun or for those who prefer the more competitive aspect, they can compete together. This activity is a great way to strengthen your relationship together and to calm your springer down.

Mistake: Walking your dog with ill-fitting equipment

Tip: Use a harness and leash that is correctly fitted and designed for your dog to help them feel more comfortable.

Dogs can sometimes pull to get away from what’s causing pain, and sometimes they rely on pressure signals from their owners so it’s helpful to make sure that equipment used is appropriate for your dog.

Mistake: Overdoing training

Tip: Keep it short and very sweet

Your dog will be motivated to work with you if you don’t expect too much too soon and keep things fun and positive. The brain takes time to adapt to learning so if we push a new learner too hard, their brain simply can’t cope and your training time will be less effective.

Mistake: Not doing bonding activities with your dog

Tip: Try interactive activities that both of you can play

Top tip: DO NOT USE laser pens/pointers! Dog safe bubbles, rolling around on the floor and playing like a dog and generally being silly with them will create a strong bond between you and your dog.

Mistake: Not making bonding time fun

Tip: Play together with a toy or treats

Focus on the fun. Bonding isn’t about the human winning, it’s about letting your dog win so they are encouraged to play with you more frequently. You can try simple things like throwing a toy or treat between your legs so the dog runs underneath you and gets its reward. Turn to face your dog and do the same again. The only goal with bonding is to have fun and let go of stress. Play is great at reducing stress.

Mistake: Only acknowledging bad behaviours

Tip: Reward good behaviour that you like

Telling your dog off can be stressful for you as the owner and for the dog too. It doesn’t feel good and we can get caught in a cycle of punishment and negativity. Turn this around by rewarding anything you see your dog doing that you do like, even if it’s a trick behaviour that you’d finally like to teach your dog. If you only teach your dog what is bad, they’ll have a hard time learning what is good.

Mistake: Using aversive tools such as a choke chain, prong or electric collar.

Tip: Swap for a more comfortable tool if you don’t intend to train your dog.

Owners can resort to all sorts of aversive tools to prevent their dogs from pulling on the leash including prong collars, choke chains, e-collars and so on but this can impact on their long-term behaviour – the stress of being restrained uncomfortably has to come out somewhere and can be expressed in barking, growling, biting, or fearful behaviours at other times. You might not realise the impact it can have in other areas of your dog’s life. Begin by caring for your dog’s emotional health and you’ll go far. Halti’s and no-pull harnesses are two more ethical options. The most ethical option is of course, training.

Mistake: Refusing to give your dog treats

Tip: Treats can be healthy and help motivate your dog

Finding healthy, fresh, human grade and dog-safe treats can be a journey of discovery and can help improve the relationship with your dog. You’ll get to understand what it is that they like and don’t like and learn that they have their own tastes just like us. Good marks if you respond to your dog’s preferences but you’ll be a serious top grader if you can help your dog to adapt it’s tastes to healthier treats like blueberries, apple, carrots, strawberries and more!

Mistake: Missing out on training opportunities

Tip: Using treat dispensers or scatter feed your dog

Many owners feed their dog from a bowl but studies suggest that dogs prefer working for their food (this is after all, what they were born to do – to hunt prey). Use a treat ball or better still, throw the food on the floor or even outside in the grass so that your dog has to sniff for its food. Sniffing is a tiring and calming activity for your dog so you’ll be helping them no end.

Mistake: Not recognising that your dog needs to be a dog

Tip: Provide your dog with regular opportunities to do the things that make him/her tick.

It might sound counter-intuitive to allow your dog to eat things like rabbit droppings, roll in poop occasionally or belly-flop into the dirtiest and muddiest of puddles but this about respecting their needs as the species of dog. To abstain from doing these things is akin to keeping an elephant in a concrete enclosure with no trees or anything enriching. Let dogs dig by providing a sand pit and hiding toys underneath the sand. Take them running through the woods and watch them get covered in mud – even better if you can take them for a river swim to clean off. Just as we need time to relax and unwind, so too do dogs.

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