



# KiwiDogAgility

by Karen de Wit

## YOUR DEBUT INTO YOUR DOG'S FIRST AGILITY EVENT

Exciting times ahead! Your dog has turned 18 months old and you have entered your first ever competition. What should you do at the event, and what has led you to the stage where you are ready to enter competitions? We have talked about some of the foundation training in previous articles, as well as how to go about entering a ribbon trial (\* see links below). What else do you need to know?



Foundation agility training starts with the same foundation skills as any activity you wish to do with your dog. This includes creating confidence and building up a good relationship with your dog.

### Create confidence in your dog

A young dog should be taken out and about as much as possible. He or she can be taken to dog competitions and they should think these are wonderful places. These are where they get to meet:

- lots of lovely people who pat them and play with them
- lots of dogs – some of whom will also play with them, and
- your dog will also see, hear and smell a bunch of new things!

It should be a place where you also share experiences and games with them, and maybe buy a new toy!

### Build up a good relationship

Your dog should enjoy being with you, and you should develop games that you can play together. Tug is one of the best, as it is a game you play close together. It certainly builds up the dog's excitement levels, which is what you require for a fast active sport like agility.



The use of food rewards is also encouraged particularly for the more stationary behaviours like start lines waits and contacts.

### Training for Agility

Training your dog to do agility includes training the individual obstacles as well as learning the handling manoeuvres that will best help your dog. Your local agility club can help you out here. There is a Code of Practice for training agility dogs less than 18 months of age. It includes recommendations on when dogs should be doing jump training, weaving poles and elevated obstacles (\*\*).

*Agility should be the best game your dog ever plays with you and going to agility events should be the best time you spend together*

Many clubs hold puppy classes where dogs will be introduced to many obstacles such as tunnels, cones, low ramps, weave lanes etc. In conjunction with this, the dog will be trained using toys and treats and often clicker training is used as only positive training methods will develop the right attitude in a dog – keen to run fast and try anything, and try again should a mistake be made.

### Teach great waits

Your dog should have a solid stay, irrespective of what you do (like waving your arms around and jumping up and down) or what is going on around them (such as the movement of other dogs and people). There is nothing more comforting than being able to leave your dog at the start line while you advance one or two obstacles down the course. By getting ahead of your dog you can accurately show him or her the correct way to go!

Your dog should want to chase you and run with you. Teach great recalls. When you move away from your dog he or she should want to move after you. This creates even more speed on the course. Your





dog should learn to run to your side, the same side that has your arm out and that you are looking at him or her from.

The handler shows the dog where to go, and what obstacles to traverse, by using a combination of :

- moving in the right direction, and
- indicating clearly by use of the body (which direction your chest and shoulders are pointing in, where you are looking and what your arms are saying). Verbals can be an added extra.

## Your first competition

The main aim of your first competition will be to ensure your dog enjoys it. You need to realise that it is unlikely that they will get everything right. If you are new to the agility game you will be in the same boat as your dog – learning from the experience!! A competition provides its own set of challenges for the dog. There is the judge who runs along near the dog, waving their arms around to indicate when a mistake has been made. There is the ring itself with the assembly area, the call boards, the calling out of names and crossing off of numbers. The lead (and collar) are removed and given to someone to place at the finish. Toys are taken away, food is concealed and placed at the finish. The obstacles may look slightly different to the ones you have practised on, and the course (the sequence of obstacles) will differ from any you have tried before. There won't be any treats or a game after just a few obstacles (make sure you have been practising this in training). Courses may be 15–18 obstacles long. There will be a lot of noise – people, dogs, tents flapping etc.



It is a good idea to just enter Jumpers class at first. This will give your dog slightly fewer actual agility challenges while he/she takes in all the other differences from training!

You might decide there are a few things that do really matter. For example you want to get a one jump lead-out. Perhaps you want to get the straight line of three jumps at the end. Don't expect it all to be perfect. Try not to call your dog back to redo every little thing they do wrong, rather keep them moving forward and encourage them. At the end of your run make sure you have a big game with them – they should feel fantastic and want to have another go!

You will have plenty of things to practice in preparation for the next competition. You may be surprised that your dog's weave entries are not as good as you thought, that they run past jumps which seem to you to be in a straight line, or that they come out of curved tunnels. You might be pleased that they waited at the start and came back to you at the finish when you called them.

Remember that titles and ribbons don't mean anything to your dog, and the best way you can ensure that one day you will get some to hang on your wall is to make sure that agility is the best game they ever play with you, and that going to agility events is the best time you spend together.

\* See the following *NZ Dog World* issues: October 2012 'The agility dance', November 2012 'Dogs jump through hoops', October 2013 'Tips for entering a ribbon trial', February 2014 'Tunnel training'.

\*\* See Agility regulations – Age and height of dogs.



## 10.1.1.2 Code of Practice for training agility dogs less than 18 months of age

Age of dog and recommendations for obstacles (max).

Where there are mixed ages the min will apply.

Jumping	Long Jump	Elevated Equipment	Weave Poles
<b>&lt;12 months</b>			
Jump height max: Carpal (wrist) height	Max number of units all heights: 1	Slightly elevated using mini table or equivalent height	Bending of the dog is permitted over 4 poles max.
<b>12–16 months</b>			
Jump height max: Elbow height	Max no. of units: Micro: 1 unit, Mini: 1–2, Midi: 2–3, Maxi: 3–4	Slightly elevated using maxi table or equivalent height	Gradually move to 12 poles in a straight line 16 mths +
<b>16 months</b>			
Gradual increase to competition height	Gradual increase in length of long jump to competition length	Competition height permitted	12 poles in a straight line permitted