

PORCINOLOGY 101 EARLY PIGHOOD DEVELOPMENT



Potbellied Piglets are adorable, but they require socialization training

A potbellied pig...the pig person's perfect pet. But what makes a pig person, because certainly not everyone is? In my opinion, a pig person is one who understands the distinct characteristics and nature of the porcine species and appreciates this uniqueness. Pigs are communicative, inquisitive and affectionate -- traits some humans don't always exhibit.

In addition to discussing the essence of the pig, we will focus on what the potbellied pig breeder can do in terms of socializing a pig before adoption. Techniques and appropriate times for initiating training for specific behaviors will be described. Methods and resources the new pig family may use to successfully continue training, as well as recommended ways to provide continuity for the adopted pig, whose environment has suddenly been altered, will be examined.

THE NATURE OF PIGS

Understanding the nature of pigs is prerequisite to teaching particular behaviors. For example, pigs are allelomimetic. That is, piggy see...piggy do. If one pig goes to the feeder, they all go. If one pig urinates, they all follow suit. Pigs function as a tight social unit, mimicking an initiator's action. Pigs in a litter will continue to behave as a group unless separated. Their fondness for the company of others is evidence of their flocking instinct.

Being very curious critters, pigs readily investigate anything that is new to their environment, be it an object or a living being. Rooting, nibbling and smelling are all natural, investigative responses to an unknown. This works to your advantage when attempting to be noticed and, in turn, eventually becoming an important part of a piglet's life.

A pig's intelligence is highly ranked in comparison with other species. It is important to be aware of this fact. The pig's superior intellect allows you to readily teach your pig new behaviors. An animal's mind functions by intuition, instinct and memory. S/he can apply the consequences of experience to new situations, thereby solving problems to a certain extent. With this excellent memory and ability to learn quickly, it is essential to be consistent with your pig. The adage, "Give them an inch and they'll take a mile," holds true with pigs. Don't allow your pig to manipulate and/or train you. **YOU** define the perimeters and rules for the pig to follow, then you'll enjoy a mutually satisfying relationship. A pig has no innate sense of right and wrong. It is your task as the trainer to teach good and bad, right and wrong.

Pigs definitely use communication through body posturing, physical displays and interaction in addition to vocalizations as previously described. Body postures exhibited by pigs include the "facing off" and "jaw clicking" behaviors of two boars or two sows when establishing the social order. Physical displays before sexual interaction consist of "nudging" and "mounting". A pet pig will nudge in hopes of receiving attention in the form of petting, cuddling or food. The more time you spend with pigs, the more you will understand their language. This also works in reverse: a pig will continue to learn human language (the meaning of words and phrases) with increased time and effort put into the pig's training.

BREEDER

Pig Handling Pre-Weaning: Handling piglings between farrowing (birthing) and weaning is critical. By giving you an idea of how I handle nursing piglets, you can ask your breeder about her gentling techniques; or, use some of mine on your newly adopted piglet. I try to visit with a sow and her newborns three times a day.

Scratching, rubbing and generally “loving up” the mother pig around her babies will show them that mom enjoys the time she spends with you. The piglets will begin to gain trust in you and ask for attention, too, please.

Handle the piglings while the mother is occupied, either out for a walk or eating close by. Sit or lie down so you are close to the same level as the piggies. The little ones, being naturally curious, will come to investigate. Extend your hand, palm up. Food or an interesting object will tempt them further. (I have noticed that pigs enjoy rings and bracelets and will nibble on them.) Remember to be calm and make no sudden movements; don't be too pushy or expect too much too quickly. Basically, be patient and just be in their space, letting them clamber over you and become familiar with you.

Keep in mind that pigs display an instinctive reflex to “flee” from predators when touched without warning. Pigs who are approached from behind and touched on the back of the neck, (where normal petting occurs) will jump and run from what may be a hungry wolf, for all they know. Use your hands to your advantage, always keeping at least one hand in front of the pig and visible. If the pig will put her face into your outstretched hand, simply wiggle your fingers under her chin in a scratching motion and you will most likely get good results. Soon you will be rubbing her on the belly and, as the pig eventually gains enough trust in you, you will be allowed to pet the pig on the head and back.

Pig Training Postweaning: There have been problems reported with piglets going off feed and developing aggressive tendencies if weaned too early. My experience indicates that pigs should be weaned no sooner than five weeks of age. Make certain all babies are readily eating dry food before weaning by designing a “creep” area. That is, a space where food is available, fresh and free choice for the piglets, that the sow cannot access. Remember, never take the pigs away from the mother; instead, take the mother away from the pigs. The sow can handle the stress from the change of environment much better than her babies.

I feel it is important to give the newly-weaned litter about one week together to adjust to life without mom. During this time, continue to visit them as often as possible to keep up their “user-friendliness” training. Don't be surprised if the piglets seem to revert from being sociable to running away from you. Remember, they have lost their security blanket and role model...mom. It will take them a bit of time to reestablish their trust in you.

My practice is to bring several piggies inside to the “pig parlor” at six weeks of age. Here they will learn to rely upon me for their food, water and other creature comforts. They will also be taught potty manners, social etiquette and gain kennel experience before allowed the run of the house.

Teaching “le toilette” is relatively simple. Place a shallow litter pan complete with litter in a corner that is furthest away from the sleeping and eating areas. Since pigs commonly urinate while they are drinking, I suggest situating their water bowl so that the pigs must go in the litter pan to drink. You will be amazed at how wonderfully this technique works. There may be a few mistakes the first couple of days until the pigs acclimate to their new environment and make the potty connection. It's always a good idea to pair a word or phrase with the behavior you are teaching. For this application, “let's pee,” “let's pooh” followed by “good pee,” “good pooh,” fills the bill.

Once pigs learn “le toilette,” accidents are nonexistent in *their* area. That's not to say that if given the full run of the house they will dutifully return to their room when they hear nature calling. It's up to you to monitor time spent outside their space and help them remember good potty manners. The nuances of litter box training are many. I contend that problems will be minimized if you start out with this technique.

Hopefully, your parlor pigs have been socialized enough to enjoy being touched and rubbed. It's now time to work on being picked up and held. Start by sitting on the floor and letting the pig crawl into your lap. While talking softly and stroking the pig, cradle her in your arms. Next, lift the pig close to your heart while saying the word “lift.” If the pig doesn't resist, great. Keep talking and rubbing, but don't let the session last too long. Quit while you are ahead, and the pig is tranquil. However, if the pig should start to squeal, place her back into your lap and keep rubbing until she calms down. Don't release a pig who is squealing as you will be reinforcing that behavior. In the future, she will know that if she squeals, she will get put down. She will have indeed succeeded in training you.

Gradually elevate the pig higher until she feels comfortable and secure with this lifting motion. Soon you will be able to carry her wherever need be. Don't forget that the correct way to lift a pig is with one hand under the rump and the other just forward of the front legs, behind the jowls. Never pick up a pig under the belly or by a back leg.



Handling piglets often is very important for socialization, so they will be social when they are older



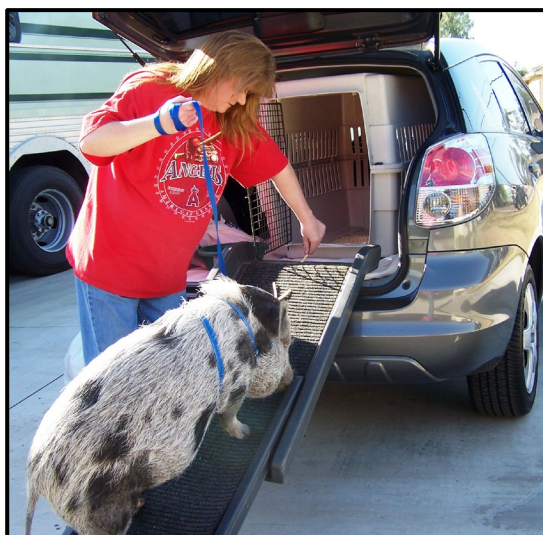
BUYER

Pig Training Postadoption: Hopefully, the piggy you have adopted has been socialized and is user- friendly to a certain extent. If this is not the case, then your mission is to go to square one and start out with the techniques outlined for the breeder. On the other hand, if your new pig pal is happy to be touched and loved, your job becomes much easier and a lot more fun. Start out slowly, allowing the pig space and time to investigate you and her new environs. Handfeeding is always a sure-fire way to a pig's heart - bonding with foodies.

Teaching your pig to come is very important. I use the word "here" paired with the shaking of a can of food. It doesn't take long for Miss Piggy to learn that if she follows the shaking can, she will get a tasty tidbit. Next, she will connect the reward with the word "here" and soon your piggy will come when called. It's a good practice to only reward with food about thirty percent of the time (intermittent reinforcement). Because there is always the possibility of receiving a treat, the pig will come at every opportunity. Otherwise, **SPS - Spoiled Pig** Syndrome - may result! We don't want to be thought of as human vending machines, after all.

Harness training should not be attempted until the pig is totally comfortable being touched all over. I will talk about this process a little later.

What you teach your pig is limited only by your imagination and the time you are willing to invest. I can't stress enough how important it is to keep one step ahead of your sweetie pig or, before you know it, your pig will be training you. Several pig people who have adopted pets from me have had this experience, especially when it comes to morning feeding. It seems that the porcines in the family had the idea that they wanted to eat before the humans were up and about. Unfortunately, the humans accommodated this behavior and sure enough, pretty soon the pigs were happily eating breakfast at 4:00 a.m. This is not a good example of humans maintaining control, but indeed a case of SPS.



Ramp Training is very important for transporting piggy to vet or events