

Jennifer Stile was apprehensive when she found out that training classes for her puppy Josie would be moving online because of the pandemic.

“Initially I said I’d wait till it’s over,” says Stile, who was taking a class in Ellicott City, Maryland. “But then I realized that it wasn’t going to be over fast enough, and I knew I needed to train my dog and I didn’t have the tools to do that without help.”

So she took the plunge — and she’s glad she did.

“I’d been trying to watch YouTube videos and do it on my own, but I wasn’t getting that instant feedback, knowing if I was doing it correctly,” she says. “Having that feedback from a trainer who was invested in me and my dog and getting to know my dog, it was much more successful than I thought.”

In fact, many trainers are finding that holding classes and private sessions online via videoconference is more than a stopgap: There are advantages for them, for their clients and for dogs. The ultimate goal of dog training is to provide owners with the tools to work with their own dogs, not for the trainer to do it.

So one advantage is that the setting is less distracting than that of the typical in-person group class that takes place in an unfamiliar environment with other dogs and people around.

“People make progress more quickly, which I think is encouraging for them, and it’s more efficient,” says Kelly Lee of Dog Kind Training in Davis, California. “And many dogs who could never do an in-person class can come to these, because they’re still in their comfort zone.”

Maura Knestout found that to be true for her terrier mix Mia. “An in-person group class wouldn’t have worked out for us, because she wouldn’t have been able to focus,” she says. “Doing the group class online, I was able to see the other dogs, and see how their handlers were working with them, but we were in our own space, so she could focus better.”

It can be less distracting for the people, as well: They can focus on what is being taught without having to worry about wrangling their dog in an overstimulating environment.

For certain behavior issues, like pet fear and aggression, online training may be the best way, pandemic or not. It is often easier on the dog, because they don’t have a stranger coming into the house — it’s less stressful for the dog, and less stressful for the people.”

This makes learning easier, as Knestout discovered with Mia.

“We were actually able to speed up the process because we didn’t have someone coming in our house and making her nervous,” she says. “Once we switched to online, she zoomed through the private lessons.”