

American Kennel Club - AKC Breeder

Spring 2011

Puppy Socialization: Key to Preventing Behavior Problems

By Arliss Paddock

After you have carefully planned a breeding for optimal health, temperament, ability, and breed quality, your primary responsibility as a breeder is to ensure a happy, permanent home for every puppy. An essential part of making sure that “forever home” will work out is seeing to it that each puppy is properly socialized during the early part of her life—especially during the most critical period of approximately 7 to 12 weeks of age.

During this special phase of development the puppy is particularly receptive to aspects of the outside world she encounters as she learns to identify new things as being “safe.” This can include different kinds of people, situations, and surroundings. In this crucial time she becomes accustomed to humans of many types, she figures out how to behave appropriately around other dogs, and she learns to face differing aspects of the world around her without fear.

It is important to understand that the amount of socialization a puppy receives—or doesn’t receive—during this period shapes her permanently. Continuing, proper socialization during this time (and beyond) is vital to ensuring that she will reach her potential as a well-balanced, confident companion who adapts to and enjoys a wide variety of situations. Conversely, a too-limited range of experiences during this period can mean that as an adult she might never be accepting of certain kinds of people or circumstances. Although later training can sometimes help to make up for inadequate socialization during the critical early period, it might be extremely difficult or even impossible to correct certain behavior problems that can result. Unfortunately, behavior problems are the major reason that owners return dogs to breeders or give them up to shelters, so of course you want to do all you can to prevent such a situation.



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Providing the best start

As the breeder, ideally you've been socializing the puppies from the beginning. You should handle them daily from birth and expose them to a wide variety of surfaces, objects, and sounds by 6 weeks. Get them used to being held in different positions and to having different parts of their bodies touched. Gently hold a paw for a few seconds while petting and talking to the pup. Introduce them to grooming in very short sessions.

Once they're past the newborn stage, consider situating the puppy pen near your home's center of activity rather than secluded outdoors or in the basement. This way, the pups can be exposed to different sights, to a variety of human voices, and to household noises such as that of the vacuum cleaner, the dishwasher, and the washer-dryer.

After they've had their first shots, the pups can be provided with more new experiences beyond the home. The American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior recommends more extensive socialization beginning as early as 7 or 8 weeks, and well before 12 weeks of age:

"Because the first three months is the period when sociability outweighs fear, this is the primary window of opportunity for puppies to adapt to new people, animals, and experiences. ... Veterinarians specializing in behavior recommend that owners take advantage of every safe opportunity to expose young puppies to the great variety of stimuli that they will experience in their lives."

The AVSAB stresses the role of proper socialization in avoiding future behavior issues that can cause owners to give up their dogs. "Incomplete or improper socialization during this important time can increase the risk of behavioral problems later in life including fear, avoidance, and/or aggression. ... Behavioral problems are the greatest threat to the owner-dog bond. In fact, behavioral problems are the number-one cause of relinquishment to shelters."

Exposure to a wider variety of experiences can include carefully planned outings to places such as the local park or shopping center, but perhaps most important is that it include a focused effort to have pups meet as many and as wide a variety of humans as possible—old people, young people, people of different skin colors, people using canes or wheelchairs, people wearing hats, and so on.

The benefit of puppy-socialization classes

It is also crucial for pups to meet a variety of other dogs during this period. However, it can be tricky to ensure that meetings with strange dogs will be safe and unthreatening to the pup. Ideally, most dog-to-dog socialization will be with canines close to the pup's age. An optimal setting for this, therefore, is the organized puppy play-group or socialization class, which provides socialization with both humans and other dogs.

What about the risk, though, of having a pup among a group of strange dogs before she has completed the full series of puppy shots? Veterinary behaviorist Valarie V. Tynes, in the article "10 Life-Threatening Behavior Myths" (Veterinary Medicine, September 2008), explains that the benefits of attending puppy class far outweigh the risk.

"Despite the growing body of data supporting the benefits of proper socialization, many veterinarians continue to be skeptical about the safety of puppy classes and the critical importance of these classes to their patients' long-term health. Classes held in an indoor (and therefore easy-to-sanitize) area and restricted to puppies of a similar age and vaccination status are unlikely to lead to disease outbreaks."

Tynes elaborates on the importance of socialization, and she goes on to describe the conditions that constitute proper socialization:

“Dogs are best able to form new relationships with those of their own and other species and to adapt to stimuli in their environment during their socialization period, commonly considered to be between 4 and 14 weeks of age. During this period, puppies begin demonstrating startle reactions to sound and sudden movements, as well as fearful body postures. Unsocialized puppies do not learn to discriminate between things that are truly dangerous and those that are not. Such puppies are likely to become increasingly fearful of novel objects, people, and environments. Proper socialization during this period is critical if an owner desires a dog that is tolerant of other people and animals and is unafraid of new environments and situations.

“Clients need to be educated about what constitutes appropriate socialization. Simply taking a puppy to a dog park and turning it loose with a group of dogs does not necessarily socialize it. Proper socialization means exposing the animal to a novel stimulus in a way that does not cause fear and should be an enjoyable, positive experience. Many dog owners force their dogs into interactions when the dogs are already showing signs of fear. This forced interaction only serves to convince the dogs that the particular situation or person is terrifying and to be avoided in the future.

“Well-run puppy classes are the easiest way to expose a dog to novel people, dogs, and situations. In a good puppy class, puppies will be exposed to children, men in uniforms and hats, wheelchairs, umbrellas, and other stimuli that are likely to frighten older dogs that have not had those experiences.”

Raising awareness among veterinarians

To help raise awareness among the veterinary community of the benefits of puppy-socialization classes, the AVSAB invited four vets with extensive experience with these classes to share their thoughts (“Early puppy socialization classes: risks vs. benefits,” Veterinary Medicine, December 2009).

The vets interviewed unanimously agreed that the benefits for puppies in attending socialization classes greatly outweighed any health risks, as long as basic precautionary strategies are in place. In the discussion they shared advice on protocols that can be followed to minimize health risk and optimize results of attending the classes, and some of their comments follow.

Dr. Kersti Seksel: “Initial vaccinations must have been administered at least one week before classes start. Because the socialization period in dogs is between 3 and 12 weeks old, I recommend that puppies be at least 8 weeks and preferably less than 13 weeks of age when they begin classes. Classes run for four or five weeks, so a puppy that is 16 weeks when it starts will be 20 to 21 weeks old when it finishes. Juvenile puppies (4 to months of age) have very different mental and motor skills than younger puppies. We want them in a class with pups their own age.”

Dr. Brenda Griffin: “I recommend that puppies start class as soon as possible, ideally between 8 and 12 weeks old. The puppies should receive their distemper-hepatitis-parvovirus vaccinations, and vaccination against bordetellosis and parainfluenza is recommended.

“Generally the first class meeting would be just for the owners, who should be given basic information on house-training, collars, leashes, positive reinforcement, socialization, and how to start training at home. We would also verify vaccination records and cover class rules. Owners are not allowed to bring their puppies to class if the pets have any signs of illness. Depending on the puppy’s origin, we may take other precautions. For example, if [one

pup in the class] came from a high-risk shelter environment ... we may keep the puppy out for two weeks. ... These owners can attend classes without their puppy.”

Dr. Jennifer Messer: “All puppies attending our classes must be at least 8 weeks old. They must have had at least one distemper combination vaccination administered by a veterinarian at 6 weeks of age or older and at least 10 days before the first class. Instructors verify the vaccination record at the start of the session, and all owners are required to commit to completing their puppies’ vaccination series as recommended by their veterinarian.

“We take many precautions. Puppy classes are held indoors and conducted before adult classes each evening. The floor is sanitized with a 1:30 bleach solution at the end of the night; we only teach on nonporous surfaces we can sanitize.”

The AVSAB offers general guidelines that puppies can start socialization classes as early as 7 to 8 weeks of age and should receive a minimum of one set of vaccines at least seven days prior to the first class, as well as a first deworming. Additionally, puppies should show no signs of illness during the classes and should be kept up-to-date on vaccines throughout the class.

Whether you or the new owners will be taking pups you’ve bred to a socialization class, do all you can to learn about classes available in your area, and be sure to discuss with the class leader and your vet any concerns or questions you may have.

An ongoing process

Dr. Ian Dunbar stresses that socialization should not end once pup and owner have finished the course. “Keep in mind that socialization is an ongoing process. Breeders must never forget that by 8 weeks, the sensitive period of socialization is two-thirds over, and they must expose the puppies to a variety of people before [they go to their new homes]. Likewise, owners need to introduce their young puppies to people in their homes. We also encourage owners to participate in additional training classes after they’ve completed the first course. To remain socialized, we recommend that adolescent dogs continue to meet and interact with at least three unfamiliar people and three unfamiliar dogs a day until they are 3 years old.”

What about taking your pup to a dog park for socialization? This might be a good option when the pup is a little older, but Dr. Griffin explains why dog parks don’t work well for early socialization:

“I generally don’t like dog parks for young puppies. Behavioral risks—especially injuries from rough play, dog-fights, or other sensitizing stimuli that can result in generalized fear responses or aggression—associated with dog parks are present as much if not more than health risks for young pups. I prefer that puppies socialize in class with puppies of the same age group and with familiar, gentle, dog-friendly dogs that belong to friends and neighbors.”

The AVSAB notes that proper exposure to new experiences during the early, critical period is the foundation for continuing socialization. “Early and adequate socialization and programs of positive training can go a long way to preventing behavior problems and improving bonding between humans and dogs. While the first three months is the most important socialization period in a puppy’s life, owners of puppies that have passed this milestone are strongly encouraged to continue to socialize their puppies to as many people, pets, and locations as is practical.”

Your role

As a responsible breeder, you are dedicated to doing all you can to ensure that the pups you breed will have

long, happy lives ahead with their human families—whether those pups are destined to be show dogs, field dogs, participants in companion events, service dogs, or “just” pets. By seeing that each pup receives proper socialization at an early age, you greatly reduce the chance of future behavior problems and help her to become the best she can be.

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