

Start as you mean to go on...

Local dog behaviourist and trainer David Brice explains why socialising your puppy is key to a well balanced and content dog in the future.



A few years ago I went to visit a puppy; 10 weeks old, still not allowed to walk outside of his garden. His owners had asked me to visit to discuss puppy 'problems' and to make a very gentle start on some training. He was already booked in to some good local classes and was starting those in three weeks time. In many cases on visits like this, it is common to find that the puppy hasn't been anywhere apart from the vets and hasn't encountered anything apart from the people and dogs in the house and everyday household noises and smells.

When I arrived it was a pleasant surprise to meet the owner carrying the puppy in from the car; he had been for his daily drive and 'carry about' to meet strangers and see, smell and hear all sorts of new and potentially scary things. This had been done sensibly, he wasn't forced too close to anything that did scare him, instead; the owner backed off, waited for him to relax and then fed him tiny pieces of chicken, approaching the scary stimulus, more slowly.

The owner had compiled a list of the number of different people, vaccinated dogs and new experiences this small puppy had encountered - not what I'd expected, but very impressively he had already met over 70 strangers; men, women, children, some with hats, walking sticks, sunglasses, beards (the men that is) and importantly he had met calm, vaccinated adult dogs as well as puppies. Basically he had been, and was being, socialised and habituated to his environment carefully, without overloading his senses, but still making everyday things, well - everyday.

SO WHY WAS THIS SO IMPORTANT?

Dogs have a period in the early weeks of their life where they are programmed to be exploratory, fearless (within limits) and keen to approach anything life throws at them. This is the time when they learn what is safe and what can be scary or potentially dangerous - the more they encounter at this time the less likely they are to be fearful in later life.



Unfortunately towards the end of socialisation there is also a hazard avoidance period, which can in some puppies start as early as 33 days of age. This period is in effect the opposite to socialisation; the puppy may become wary of stimuli they haven't encountered before and in many cases this is happening just as the puppy arrives at its new home! So what to do? Make sure that you put positive associations to things that you know could be scary - like injections or micro-chipping for instance and if the puppy becomes afraid of something, back away, give the puppy time to recover its composure and approach more slowly next time.

You could consider taking your puppy to WELL RUN puppy parties; these are usually held at the vets, where the environment can be sterilised to prevent infection if your puppy has only had their first vaccination. These are a great way to carry on with socialisation and to learn yourselves, whilst also putting really positive associations to visiting the vets; something that both you, the vet and the puppy will be thankful for in the following years.

Well run puppy parties involve controlled socialisation, where the puppies learn to interact and function in the presence of other breeds and types of dogs, and also with people. Gone are the days (hopefully) where the puppies were allowed to pile on top of each other, leaving some traumatised and fearful, and others as bullies, who will undoubtedly meet their match when they try this with an adult dog. Both scenarios unfortunately can lead to dogs becoming reactive or aggressive to other dogs through fear.

So if you have a puppy or are considering taking one on, please remember socialisation is the key to a happy and responsive dog (for the rest of their lives); worth a few months effort to ensure another 15 years of enjoyment and companionship.

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