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The Importance of Puppy Socialization

By Arliss Paddock

From the very start, a puppy learns important lessons through his experience of the world around him. Even in the first few weeks as he snuggles with his dam, wrestles with his littermates, and is handled by his breeder each day, the personality traits and social skills that he will have all his life are beginning to form.

As the weeks go by, exposure to a variety of experiences is crucial to his becoming a well-rounded adult. Studies have shown that a puppy's experiences in the first three months of life strongly influence what kind of companion he will grow to be and how he will react to the world. Will he shy away from children? Will he be afraid of people in hats? Will he be aggressive toward other dogs? Or will he be easygoing and adaptable in a variety of situations?

Perhaps surprisingly, failure to properly expose a young puppy to certain situations or types of people during this brief early period can result in his being forever fearful of them as an adult. Early socialization—or the lack of it—is a vital determinant of a dog's lifelong behaviors. Without proper socialization, it is unlikely that a pup will become the adult dog he could have been, whether as a competitor in canine events or as a happy, well-adjusted pet.



Labrador Retriever. Photo by Mary Bloom.

Windows of Opportunity

But what exactly is “proper socialization”? Socialization is the process of exposing a puppy from early on to as wide a variety of environments, situations, animals, and types of people as can be done safely and without causing trauma to the pup.

Canine-behavior researchers have found that there are several crucial “socialization windows” in the first year—limited periods during which the pup is receptive to the lifelong benefits of exposure to new things. Of these periods, the earliest—the first 12 weeks of life—is the most critical. According to the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior (AVSAB), sociability outweighs fear during this period, making it “the primary window of opportunity for puppies to adapt to new people, animals, and experiences.” This period is when the pup first learns to accept and enjoy the company of people, to behave appropriately around other dogs, and to experience the differing aspects of the world around him without fear.

Soon after 12 weeks, most pups will enter a fear-prone period in their development. After this point, if the pup has not been well socialized it may be at best permanently difficult for him to adapt to certain unfamiliar experiences.

“Basically, an adult dog’s temperament and behavior habits, both good and bad, are shaped during puppyhood—very early puppyhood,” says veterinarian and leading animal behaviorist Dr. Ian Dunbar, author of *Before & After Getting Your Puppy*. Further, Dunbar notes that behavior issues are the number-one cause of relinquishment to shelters.

Thus it is essential that as a breeder you understand the importance of socialization. Although its benefits continue throughout (and beyond) the first 18 months of the dog’s life, remember that the most critical socialization period ends at 12 weeks, so the bulk if not all of this most-vital groundwork is up to you.

Strategies

What can a breeder do to properly socialize each pup? The starting point is for the litter to be raised within a home environment with frequent human contact, rather than secluded in the yard or a kennel. This is the first step in ensuring that the pups will be prepared for life in a household, with all the sounds, smells, and hustle-and-bustle that this entails.

Some breeders will move a litter from room to room on progressive weeks, to change the scene and familiarize the pups with such varied sounds as those of the dishwasher, television, and washer-dryer. Others like to situate the puppy pen near the home’s center of activity, so the pups are exposed to comings and goings and hear a variety of human voices.

The litter should be accustomed to human touch from the start. Most breeders pick up each puppy at least daily, usually to weigh or otherwise inspect them and assess their condition. Puppies can be gently held in different positions and get used to having different parts of their body handled.

“My puppies are handled every day from birth,” says longtime English Cocker Spaniel breeder Betty Ganung. “I start trimming their nails at 2 weeks, and by 5 weeks they are introduced to clippers and have toys to play with and some individual playtime.”

As puppies mobilize themselves and begin exploring, it’s important that they experience a wide variety of textures, stimuli, and challenges. Experienced breeders recommend providing a variety of surfaces for the pups to walk on, such as carpeting, slippery floors, and bumpy terrain. Have the pups learn about stairs. Set up “obstacle courses” for them to figure out and climb up and down or through, and include unstable elements that (safely) tip or wobble underfoot. Provide toys in a range of sizes, shapes, and materials.

Take the pups on frequent short trips in the car. Bring them into large buildings if possible, and, once they are vaccinated, to a variety of parks and outdoor situations where they can safely meet other dogs and encounter other animals.

"100 People by 12 Weeks"

Most important of all is to expose the pups to as wide a variety of people as possible—people of differing ages, sizes, skin color, and dress. Many dogs can be particularly apprehensive of men and very small children if they were not exposed to them during the early socialization period. "I invite neighborhood kids over to play with all my pups," says Ganung. "I let them pick them up, always while I'm there to supervise."

Dunbar recommends that a puppy meet at least 100 different people by age 12 weeks. "Not only is this easier to do than it might sound," he explains, "it's also lots of fun." Breeders can arrange to have small groups of friends and family visit the pups, and take pups to public areas such as pet-supply stores and school grounds.

A Standard of Care

Because of the evidence that early socialization can prevent serious canine behavior problems such as fear, avoidance, and aggression, in 2008 the AVSAB issued the position statement that it should be the standard of care for puppies to be socialized in the first 12 weeks.

An excellent means of early socialization is for puppies to attend puppy-kindergarten classes. Although many vets have held that puppies should not be exposed to strange dogs before 12 to 16 weeks because of disease risk, the AVSAB supports participation in puppy kindergarten classes before the full series of puppy vaccines has been completed as long as all puppies in the class are vet-checked to be healthy and parasite-free upon entering the class and are kept current on vaccinations.

An AVSAB position statement says, "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. Enrolling in puppy classes prior to 3 months of age can be an excellent means of improving training, strengthening the human-animal bond, and socializing puppies in an environment where risk of illness can be minimized."

By taking steps to see that the pups you breed are properly socialized during those critical first 12 weeks, you are helping to ensure that they will grow to be happy, well-rounded companions for life.

Arliss Paddock breeds and shows English Cocker Spaniels and is former managing editor of the AKC Gazette. This article appeared in the Winter 2008 issue of AKC Breeder, the AKC's newsletter for breeders.