Puppy Socialisation – What All Owners Should Know!

What is (and why is) Socialisation So Important

Early socialisation is a very important part of dog development, but it needs to be carried out with care to avoid long-term behavioural issues.

The key puppy "socialisation period" is between approximately 8 to 14 weeks of age. This means that experiences (both good and bad) with humans and other animals can have potentially life long effects on future behaviour.

Socialisation does not just mean "play". Socialisation means learning to accept the close proximity of members of the same species (other dogs) as well as members of other species (humans). Play is only a small part of this process!

When Socialisation goes wrong…

Often owners see socialisation as allowing puppies "free reign" off leash play with other dogs. Unfortunately, if a puppy has a negative experience during such a play session, during its critical socialisation period, this can lead to that puppy growing into an adult dog that displays fear-based aggression towards other dogs (and puppies).

Good socialisation should build a dog's confidence, not scare or intimidate. It should be done gradually and to a level they can tolerate, in a safe and controlled environment. This allows them to learn appropriate skills, for example greeting behaviours, so that they can have more successful social interactions down the track.

Teaching Puppy "Life Skills"

I prefer to think of socialisation as teaching of "Life Skills" to puppies – this avoids the "play" connotations of socialisation and allows us to prioritise what it is puppies need to learn from a young age.

There are 10 key life skills that puppies need to acquire, along with some tips on how to achieve them: (adapted from *Life Skills For Puppies: Practical Tips for New Owners* – British Small Animal Veterinary Congress 2010, Helen Zulch BVSc MRCVS)

1. **Confidence!** Puppies need to be habituated to the sights, sounds, smells, humans and animals they will be faced with in their day to day life. When out and about, talk to puppy in a happy voice to show you (and they) should feel safe and happy. Watch your puppy and remove them from a situation if they seem overwhelmed. This will help to reduce fear and anxiety down the track.
2. **Impulse control:** Puppies need to develop self control, and be shown they can't do everything they want when they want to! Puppies should be taught they have to calmly "sit" and look at their owner before receiving a reward eg food or play.
3. **Dealing with frustration:** Puppies need to develop frustration tolerance in order to prevent problems such as aggression on the lead (which can be the result of frustration at dealing with restraint). Teaching pups to do so through exposure to puzzle feeders and teaching cued greetings on lead can help with this.
4. **Staying calm:** Puppies need to be taught to "switch off" and be calm, as over-arousal can be problematic. Always reward calm behaviours eg sitting quietly at home and ignore hyperaroused / attention seeking behaviours eg jumping up or barking at you.
5. **Listening:** Puppies need to be taught to respond to cues quickly, and be able to do so in the presence of distractions. Ensure cue words are used consistently and practice them without distractions for greater success later on.
6. **Good manners:** Puppies need to learn socially acceptable behaviour in human, as well as interdog, contexts. Teaching a default "sit" position when puppy wants something, as well as teaching calm, appropriate greetings around other dogs is very important. Start on leash to gain better control.
7. **Touching is good!** Puppies need to learn to tolerate handling of all areas of their bodies by their owners and strangers. This can be practiced at home by playing with puppy's paws, mouth and ears, and rewarding tolerance.
8. **Knowing the rules:** Puppies need boundaries to be established and rules to be applied consistently and fairly. Establish a set of house rules all family members and visitors must follow and be consistent!
9. **Help to make the right choices:** Puppies need to have choices, to increase welfare and reduce stress eg what toy to play with, where to sleep. But they also need to be guided into making the correct choices. If you don't want puppy to do something, don't let them practise it! And when puppy does what you want, reward that behaviour. Eventually they will make these "right" decisions alone.
10. **The right to be a dog:** Puppies need time to perform normal canine behaviours eg digging, chewing, sniffing, playing and running. They also need to be respected when they show signals they are uncomfortable in a situation – and be allowed to leave that situation. For example, if they are scared of a dog at a dog park, they should be given an escape route, not forced to interact.

How being a good Leader can make you a good Owner!

It is a common myth that dogs have a dominance hierarchy and that humans must assert "dominance" over their pet. Dogs form social groups, that often have a "leader", but that leader is not a dominant force. The leader is fluid and changes with time and the needs of the social group.

As such, a good owner provides a safe, secure environment where the puppy is provided opportunities to learn appropriate behaviour and is then reinforced (positively) for it.

Using forceful "dominance" measures e.g. yelling, rubbing a dogs nose in it, hitting a dog on the nose or pulling a leash harshly, are not only detrimental to the relationship between the dog and owner, but are counterintuitive to natural dog behaviour.

A good owner is a patient owner – being a dog sometimes clashes with human values, and some behaviours that may seem "bad" are not malicious, but simply a valid difference in perspective.

The Benefits of Puppy Preschool (when done right!)

Puppy Preschool classes are an invaluable opportunity to set the foundation for a lifelong relationship between a puppy and an owner, by teaching owners (and dogs) the appropriate "guidelines" for socialisation, while allowing them a chance to demonstrate these behaviours in a controlled environment.

Puppies need to find puppy classes a fun, non-threatening experience and not be overloaded with stimulation and experiences. Each puppy will find the stimulation and training experience different so the class needs to be tailored for each individual puppy and owner.

P**uppy School and Socialisation at VetHQ**

Our puppy preschool is run by certified, positive-reinforcement based trainer Libby Young. Having attended her puppy classes, I can genuinely say that she tailors each class to the needs of each puppy – and never pushes them beyond their limits – to ensure the experiences of puppies are positive and appropriate.

If you'd like to book your puppy into puppy preschool, or enquire about adolescent classes (for pups over the age of 14 weeks) please contact Libby on 0415 715 426 or VetHQ on 9326 1255.

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