

Canine Development and Socialization

Early Socialization to People, Animals and Environments

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Puppies are wonderful! They stir our instinct to nurture, cuddle and care for a cute little bundle of squirming, living, responsive animal. Puppies will grow into adult dogs very quickly - and dogs are not little children in furry coats. If we really love our puppy, we want to do everything we can to help our family and the puppy understand each other and work for mutual joy of companionship together. We will help you to understand your puppy's natural behavior and some of its needs which are very different from those of people. We also will try to teach you how to manage your puppy's behavior in ways that will please both family and the adult dog for a lifetime of togetherness and enjoyment.

The early development patterns of puppies

From birth to about two weeks of age, puppies are pretty helpless with nearly all effort devoted to eating and sleeping. Their eyes and ears are not yet open and body temperature is maintained by the warmth of their mother, siblings and environment. This is often called the neonatal period. The period from 14 to 21 days seems to be a transition period when pups begin to develop their motor skills as well as develop their vision and hearing. By about three weeks, pups can respond with a startled reaction to a noise and many are able to drink milk. Their first teeth are just beginning to push through the gums and in several weeks they can begin to eat solid food.

Studies on many species of animals have shown that learning may occur in special ways very early in life during what some have called sensitive periods for learning. Some have compared the brain to a sponge that takes in and retains information quickly and easily in the first few hours to the first few weeks of life. In puppies, it appears that the most sensitive period for early learning occurs from 3 to 13 weeks of age. Since each puppy is different, we often consider the sensitive period for early learning in puppies to range from the first day after birth to 16 weeks of age. Studies indicate that this is the best time for puppies to absorb information and learn from new experiences. It appears that these sensitive or critical weeks are an optimum time for a puppy to become comfortable with exposure to all sizes and appearances of people, to other dogs and to many other sounds, sights and situations that may be encountered in later life without being fearful.

Understanding the importance of early learning

This period in the puppy's life becomes extremely important to a pup's development and is referred to as an optimum time for socialization. This means that the breeder, during the first seven or eight weeks of life, and the new owner, after seven weeks, have a joint responsibility for starting the pup off right in life with appropriate socialization. If people care about a dog's development, they must take responsibility for exposing it as a puppy to many experiences with people, both children and adults. Puppy should become comfortable with people handling all parts of the pup's body, respond easily to control by people, become comfortable interacting with other dogs both young and old, and become comfortable with many sounds, sights and situations within and outside the home, in the yard, and in the community. This learning is best during this sensitive early period of life.

Socialization stimulates development of the brain and the immune system. It has been suggested that the easiest way for a breeder to socialize puppies during the first seven weeks of life is to have the mother dog and her pups in the kitchen of the home with a family of several young children. The kitchen provides an environment for exposing the pups to many sounds, sights and situations they will encounter in later life. Handling each day by the young children and adults in the family will expose the pups to handling and control by people as well as stimulate and improve the development of the brain and the immune system of the puppy. An important reason for continuing socialization and early learning for puppies in their new homes is related to the development of a puppy's brain. Scientific, but non-invasive, EEG studies of the brains of puppies provide excellent evidence that puppies' brains develop so rapidly that they show mature adult brain wave patterns by the age of 7 to 8 weeks. This means that puppies' brains are ready by 7 to 8 weeks of age to learn control by people and socialization in the home and in socialization classes.

The best age for puppies to start classes

Puppies should be enrolled in these classes at seven to twelve weeks of age - after they have had their first vaccination in the series of several vaccinations recommended by their veterinarian. These early learning experiences with people and other puppies, beginning at seven or eight weeks of age are more important to the life of the puppy than waiting until the whole series of vaccinations is completed. In our experience, the risk of behavior problems without early socialization is much greater than the risk of infection for an eight week old puppy that has had its first vaccinations.

Housetraining Puppies

Understanding natural elimination behavior is important for housetraining. During the first three weeks, puppies are unable to eliminate without help. Mother dog needs to lick the anogenital area of each puppy to stimulate elimination several times a day. When she licks the anogenital area, she also ingests the puppy's feces and urine. This is a natural behavior that has the important function of keeping the nest clean until puppies can go outside the nest. By about three to four weeks of age, puppies begin to walk outside the whelping box and to eliminate away from their nest. Puppies' desire to eliminate away from its sleeping place is a natural behavior that is very useful in housetraining. Using this natural behavior, puppies will quickly learn to eliminate away from their confinement area and can be taught to eliminate in one selected place as desired by the new owner. New owners need to understand the importance of using this natural behavior to quickly succeed with housetraining by 10 to 12 weeks of age.

Training and Learning

Keep training sessions short and sweet. Not only do puppies learn best in the first weeks of life, but scientific evidence is available to show that dogs learn best in short two minute teaching/learning sessions. Experiments show that dogs learn more and retain more in ten sessions of two minutes when compared with learning after one session of twenty minutes. This means that dogs can learn easily to obey and please people using short two minute training sessions in their own home. There is no need to have practice sessions of 15 to 30 minutes or longer. Puppies can be taught in short sessions, ten or more times a day, for effective learning. Puppies also associate obedience with the locations where they are taught. Think about it - for years people have observed that dogs may obey great in a training ring, but respond less well at home. So if we want puppies to respond eagerly and obey wherever we are, we must teach puppies wherever we are; in every room in the house, in the yard, in the car, on walks and in any place we wish our dog to respond quickly to our requests. This place/situation training becomes easy if we practice in 1 to 2 minute sessions 10 to 20 times a day.

Involve the entire family in the teaching process. Behavior is related or associated, in the puppy's brain, with the person(s) who teach and assume leadership. We all know families where the dog may obey mother or father best, but does not obey well for the rest of the family. If we want the puppy to respond quickly to obey all persons in the family, then the puppy must receive instruction from all persons in the family over 3 years of age - children, teens, women and men. This encourages age, gender and size equality for leadership of people in the eyes of the puppy.

We should teach at one or more unpredictable intervals during each hour when people are home - short 1 to 2 minute sessions from the time of waking in the morning to the time of going to bed at night. Don't follow a schedule, just be unpredictable in asking puppy to respond in short 1 to 2 minute sessions. This teaches puppy to be eager to respond at any time, any place. Too often we practice 30 minutes each day at a scheduled time and puppies soon learn to obey quickly, but only at the scheduled time of day during the formal training session. Instead of once a day, we want a puppy to learn to respond quickly and eagerly any time and any place -we must teach at different and unpredictable times of day and in many places.

Dominance and Leadership

Puppies need leadership and a strong pecking order (hierarchy). Puppy's brain and behavior develop in accord with survival skills. These patterns of behavior are very different from humans just as their physiology and anatomy are different. For example, dogs in nature live in a pack and have a strong pecking order (hierarchy). Puppies may begin to growl at other puppies as early as three weeks of age if given a bone. They may also begin play fighting at 3 to 4 weeks of age to test other puppies and establish a pecking order in the litter. Dogs do not recognize or use human concepts of equality, fairness or sharing. A puppy's genetic and species behavior does not include any human concept of fairness or equality. There is no equality and no fairness in "dogdom". We often want our dogs to be equal and we try to treat them with fairness, but this is contrary to the inherent behavior patterns in a puppy's brain. Puppies begin to play fight during the third and fourth weeks of life to establish a ranking within the litter. This genetic behavior to establish a pecking order continues when puppies are taken from the litter and brought to a new home. Two dogs in a household cannot live together peacefully and comfortably until they have established a pecking order. Pecking orders often change when a new dog is introduced into the home or as a top dog's age or strength changes in relation to the other dog in the household.

Puppies try to control and become "top dog" in a family - at least part time. When puppies are brought to a new home, they continue to use all their skills to be a leader in the family and get what they want when they want it. Puppies do this by jumping, play nipping, barking, growling, crying out as if in pain to avoid control, and demanding attention from people when and where the puppy wants it. Most families change their lifestyle to accommodate and please the new puppy. As the puppy grows older, it continues to learn how to avoid people control and to please people only when the puppy wants to please. And this means puppy obeys quickly only about fifty to seventy percent of the time. This lack of control and leadership by the family can lead to unwanted behaviors and increasing frustration and anger by family members. Unfortunately, this may also lead to the dog being removed from the household.

The role and importance of eye contact for leadership by people

The eyes of a puppy are closed at birth and they usually open at 2 to 3 weeks of age though there are individual and breed variations. Vision appears to be rather fully developed by 4 to 5 weeks of age. Canine eyes and vision are not the same as those of people. Canine eyes have a greater range of sight from side to side, about 250 degrees. They also have more rods than cones in the eye. Cones are more suited to register fine detail from shorter distance. Rods increase the ability of the dog as a hunter/predator to see greater distances and detect movement of prey.

Eyes are also important in conveying signals and messages between puppies or between puppies and people. When two puppies approach each other in the park, they usually stare at each other to see which dog will move its eyes (blink) first. Moving the eyes is a very powerful signal that one puppy is willing to act in subordinate manner in this relationship and accept the other dog as its leader. This important signal is so subtle that most people are not aware of what has happened. Most people do not understand that staring into the eyes of a puppy/dog is a challenge to the dog and may trigger aggressive actions. People should avoid eye contact with strange puppies/dogs to reduce risk of threat and confrontation, unless the person is prepared to assert leadership and dominance.

On the other hand, people must never let their own dog outstare them. Whenever people have eye contact with their own puppy, the dog must move its eyes first to signal that the puppy is accepting the leadership/dominance of the person - child or adult. This powerful form of communication through eye contact with your puppy should start at 4 to 7 weeks of age and continue throughout the life of the dog. All members of the family must use this body language since the puppy should accept all people in the family, including children, as leaders for the dog.

Position reinforces leadership of people over puppies

Puppies' brains are programmed to require a pecking order and they are very comfortable with a strong leader. But they often challenge other dogs and people to be sure the leader is still a strong leader. Leaders reinforce their dominance by eating first, by seeking the best resting places, by leading the way. To emphasize leadership by people, we have puppies sit and wait while people go through outside doors ahead of the puppy. Why? Because when two dogs wish to go through a door, the leader dog goes through the door first. This is one way to tell which puppy/dog is subordinate and which is the leader by observing this very natural behavior. Owners should start developing this powerful form of body language with their puppy at an early age of 7 to 8 weeks. Remember, in the brain of the puppy, leaders always go first through outside doorways.

Establish leadership by petting/stroking puppies over the head and neck

In establishing dominance, many dogs will come together, sniff front, sniff rear and then one will try to put their head and neck at right angles over the neck and shoulder of the other to indicate dominance. Or one dog may mount from the front over the head or from the rear to get above a subordinate dog. Dominance and leadership are also expressed naturally by people with the body language of petting/stroking a puppy firmly over the head, neck and shoulders. Puppies immediately recognize the dominance or the attempt at dominance of a person who strokes them slowly and firmly over the head, neck and shoulders. Puppies often calm down and become comfortable when owners exercise leadership by making eye contact, staring them down, and stroking the puppy over the head and neck. Conversely, puppies who do not want to be subordinate will try to outstare people and resist the hands of people who try to control by holding or by petting/stroking over the head and neck of the puppy.

People who want to be leaders should always win. If puppy wins 10 to 30% of the time, puppy will try harder because he now knows if he is persistent, he will win, just as slot machine players are motivated to keep pulling the handle by intermittent winning at the slot machine. When a puppy wins part time, it often thinks of the owner as an adversary to beat just as gamblers think of beating the machine.

Collars or headcollars and leashes reinforce leadership and control

As stated throughout this program, people are urged to use motivation as the primary way to gain leadership and control of their puppy. Most people need some method of humane restraint to provide control when a puppy wants to be the leader and tries to do unwanted behavior. That is why many veterinarians and obedience instructors recommend using a nylon buckle collar or a nylon headcollar plus outdoor and indoor leashes to provide back-up control and leadership for people.

Most people are familiar with the usual buckle collar and an outdoor leash. The headcollar is similar to a halter worn by other domestic animals such as horses. Headcollars use a dog's natural instincts to respond to leadership and control of another dog. When people desire control and pull on the leash, the headcollar prevents pulling ahead or forging when walking, assists pups to sit and stay, and stops or prevents unwanted barking, jumping and nipping/mouthing. The indoor lead is a ten foot lead that puppy wears in the house (drags on floor) to give people a line to grab and control a puppy from 1 to 10 feet away. It is also useful, like an umbilical cord, to keep a puppy in view, when it is out of confinement during the housetraining program.

Puppies respond to leaders who speak softly and in a praising voice

Puppy's ears are closed at birth and do not open until the transition period of development at two or three weeks of age. Then hearing develops rapidly as the brain matures. And by 7 to 8 weeks, puppy's hearing is many times better than the hearing of people. That's why we like to have dogs who will bark to alert us about strange noises before we hear them. Stop and think about other examples of their sensitivity to sound. Many owners claim that their dogs will show "alert behavior" to the sound of the motor of the owner's car before it reaches the driveway of their house. If we recognize the ability of our dogs to hear so well, why do we shout and yell at our dogs? Do we need to use a loud command voice to help our dogs hear? No!

Puppies learn quickly to respond eagerly to the soft, praising voice of a child as well as the soft praising voice of an adult. If we want puppies to respond quickly to all members of a family, all members should speak to their puppies in a sonic praising voice that telegraphs to the dog that good things will happen if you obey quickly. Speaking softly and in a praising tone also gives gender and age and size equality for people in the brain of the dog, when the adults, particularly males with usually deep voices, speak in the same soft praising (higher tone) voice.

Puppies are easily motivated to obey with rewards

Puppy's brain is programmed to evaluate the benefits and the costs of nearly all behaviors. Even as puppies, dogs are cost-benefit analysts. They do only those things which are beneficial (pay off in their mind). They also evaluate each situation to choose the behavior that may be of greatest benefit (pay off best for the effort expended). For these reasons dogs quickly learn how to manipulate people to gain rewards for both wanted and unwanted behaviors. For example, many dogs will resist coming when owners call until the reward for doing what the owner wants is greater than the reward for doing what the dog wants. To have a dog that is eager to please people, we need to understand how a dog responds to body language, to humane restraint and to rewards of petting, praise, affection and sometimes food as people learn in the puppy socialization class.

Some motivating rewards

Each puppy may show individual differences in the degree of motivation to different rewards. For most dogs the best reward is attention by people. Eye contact is often the most powerful reward followed by verbal praise, petting and affection. However they need to be hungry enough for attention so they will work diligently for the reward of attention. Dogs quickly recognize that "nothing in life is free", as Dr. Voith has stated it. Therefore, in teaching puppies we can quickly motivate them by withholding attention to have them

earn their rewards of eye contact, praise, petting and affection by quickly and eagerly obeying the leaders.

Dogs will also work very hard for negative attention such as scolding, yelling etc., - stopping the unwanted behavior temporarily, only to try again when they want more attention. And we reinforce this unwanted behavior with scolding only part of the time, which is even stronger reinforcement on the variable ratio schedule - the most powerful schedule of reinforcement.

Food is also an excellent reward for most puppies. Most owners have observed how eagerly some dogs will obey to receive rewards of treats or rewards of regular food if it is fed by hand as part of a scientific learning program.

The scientific use of rewards is helpful in managing puppy's behavior. Appropriate use of rewards motivates a puppy to be eager to please children as well as adults and lets us use positive commands to substitute desired behaviors for unwanted behaviors.

We have no need to use negatives or punishment

We can avoid saying "no" which is usually ineffective because the pup soon learns to use it to stimulate attention getting rewards. We can also stop scolding and yelling if the dog is motivated by positive reinforcement to obey quickly and eagerly with desired behavior for all members of the family, even children 3 years and over in age. By appropriate and scientific use of rewards and conditioned stimuli, puppies can be motivated to please us from 8 weeks of age until old age hinders their physical ability to respond. These eager to please responses enhance the joy and companionship of having a dog and provide mutual benefits for improving health and quality of life.

Early teaching and socialization benefit development for a lifetime

When puppies learn to please people early in life, we provide a foundation for lifetime reinforcement of learning more easily and better than learning to please at a later age. This early bonding improves companionship, interactions with other dogs and people and prevents behavior problems that too often result in removal from the household and ultimate euthanasia of the dog. The greatest cause of death among dogs is by euthanasia related to unwanted behavior. Understanding the social and behavioral development of your puppy can help new owners prevent problem behavior.

Learning is a lifelong endeavor

Even though early learning is the best time for development and socialization, dogs continue to learn throughout their lifetime for as long as they continue to use their brain. Use it or lose it" - just as we do with our muscles. Yes - old dogs, as well as puppies, can learn new tricks.

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