

Successfully raising puppies

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The early weeks of a puppy's life are especially important. During this period of significant physical and psychological development the processes of socialisation and habituation take place (Table 1). Appropriate experiences during this sensitive phase will generally ensure that a pet fit for its destined purpose is produced. Failure on the part of those responsible for this stage is likely to produce dogs that find life in a domestic environment, when a wide range of people, a variety of potentially stressful everyday activities and other pets are encountered, problematic. Then behavioural difficulties, including aggression, fear and anxiety conditions and phobia development, commonly result. Therefore those who produce puppies have a responsibility to breed from healthy, temperamentally sound stock and to ensure conditions in which pups spend their early weeks are suitable in behavioural terms.

CREATING APPROPRIATE LEARNING CONDITIONS

Everything that happens to young puppies must be viewed as preparation for the life ahead with hygiene and infection control balanced with:

A domestic environment that:

- Is complex and stimulating without being unpredictable and stressful

TABLE 1.

- **Socialisation:** during this process puppies learn about individuals from their own and other species which will thereafter comprise their social group
- **Socialisation period:** this *period of exceptional sensitivity* occurs between approximately 3 to 12 weeks of age, with 3 to 5 weeks considered especially important. During the latter weeks a fearful response to novel stimuli develops, which although adaptive in evolutionary terms undermines the ability of puppies deprived of appropriate experiences to cope well with novelty
- **Habituation** – during this process non-stressful exposure to normal environmental stimuli teaches individuals to live comfortably with them

Thereafter carefully and systematically continuing these processes is important, because subsequent isolation can erode early learning and/or its benefits can later be undermined by fear-inducing experiences

TABLE 2.

Important aspects of the physical environment:

- Design, layout, facilities/furnishings, materials
- Scent profile
- Noise profile

Therefore from an early stage puppies should:

- Be exposed to the sights, sounds and smells associated with domestic equipment and activities including use of electrical appliances, children playing, dogs barking
- Encounter substrates of varying textures e.g. tiles, carpet, concrete
- Have access to different areas for eating, sleeping, playing and eliminating
- Have enough resources, such as feeding bowls and suitable canine toys (rotated to maintain interest), to prevent unnecessary competition

- Does not isolate youngsters from everyday activities, for example when they are housed in an otherwise unused dining room or conservatory.

A social environment that:

- Ensures handling by a number (minimum is four) of people representing both sexes, a range of ages, different ethnic groups and varying appearances
- Compromises where this is not possible by changing the way carers appear by, for example, having them wear hats/helmets, spectacles, bulky clothing and adopt unusual gaits and voices
- Includes some exposure to young children. Where this is genuinely not possible sound recordings can be useful but they should not be viewed as a substitute for the real thing
- Includes brief, non-stressful periods of separation from the dam and litter mates in preparation for future normal daily routines
- Incorporates appropriate exposure to other canines
- If possible includes appropriate exposure to other pet species – in some form at least, for instance scent and sound.

INTRODUCING PUPPIES TO PERMANENT HOMES

Well-handled transitions require knowledge of canine behaviour, anticipation and planning to ensure minimum disruption. The greater the discrepancy between a puppy's original environment

and its current circumstances the more stressful and potentially problematic the experience will be. Owners need to be advised to avoid overwhelming their puppy with new experiences or to inadvertently reinforce any fear or anxiety he/she displays. Rather they should proceed carefully and reward calm, bold behaviour with an appropriate reinforcer (food, attention, toys, play) for their particular pet. Sensitive handling and careful observation generally enable people to create positive associations for their new pets with novel individuals and situations, thus continuing the socialisation and habituation begun by well-informed, responsible breeders.

Breeders should be encouraged to:

- Allow prospective owners and their families to visit and handle the developing pups so that relationships are already established
- Maintain these between visits with scent impregnated items
- Sacrifice a piece of bedding that has acquired the scent of the mother and her offspring to guarantee some continuity for the youngster
- Provide each pup with a soft toy that goes with them (particularly helpful with retrieving breeds).

New owners should be advised to:

- Prepare in advance a suitable, quiet location appropriately equipped with bed, toys etc for the puppy, where it will not be isolated but will be protected from too much stressful activity – dog gates, puppy pens or properly introduced indoor crates are useful
- Use commercial pheromone preparations and familiar scents to reduce the stress associated with travelling and help it settle
- Be fully conversant with the breeder's methods (provided these have been satisfactory – if not, the suitability of the source is questionable) and maintain as nearly as possible previously adopted management routines, changing them gradually to suit the current household
- Protect the pup from intrusive attentions – gradually conducting systematic introductions where the people first encountered are either already familiar or most closely resemble previous carers
- Carefully control introductions to other pet species to ensure that both the puppy and already established pets are protected from stress.

Cats should always be able to get away from the newcomer, either by jumping up onto an easily accessible elevated surface or behind a dog gate.



Fig. 1: Integrating youngsters with resident pets can be a source of conflict and other problem behaviours if owners do not receive the right advice.

Older dogs should be allowed controlled access to the puppy, preferably after exercise and in a neutral area, such as a park (if vaccination status allows) or garden – keeping any potential focus for conflict such as toys, food or owner attention to a minimum (Fig. 1). Puppies should never be allowed to irritate older pets.

- Continue house training using a current method based only on positive reinforcement not punishment. It is important to ensure client expectations are realistic and they are prepared for the time and effort required
- Carefully intersperse activity with realistically timed periods of isolation in preparation for their dog's future management routine, ensuring that 'leavings and greetings' are low key and inconsequential



Fig. 2: As soon as puppies have settled they should start to learn about the world by having a range of non-stressful experiences at home and outside.

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- Introduce new experiences, such as wearing a collar, being 'examined', and exposure to different locations within the home, in a carefully controlled manner once the puppy is settled. Balance is important as 'too much too soon', especially if the pup is not allowed sufficient rest and time to recover between novel experiences, can be stressful thus potentially undermining efforts at continuing habituation and creating positive associations
- Introduce basic obedience training using positive methods based on reward and reinforcement only.

EXPOSURE TO THE OUTSIDE WORLD

Many puppies are not released to new owners until eight weeks of age, which can be a risk factor for development of later fearful behaviour. Therefore, as soon as they are settled, broadening the range of everyday experiences is essential to prevent fearful reactions when common environmental stressors are later encountered (Fig. 2). Again a carefully controlled plan is required so that everything and everyone pups are likely to experience on a daily or intermittent basis is introduced in a non-stressful manner at this early stage. Care needs to be taken however not to rush through the process in such a way that a sensitive youngster is pressurized or feels overwhelmed by novel situations, as this can have the reverse effect from that intended.

Experiences should include:

- Various methods of transport
- A variety of domestic, retail and leisure locations, where a range of different activities are carried out (Fig. 3)
- Positive, low key introductions to the veterinary surgery and grooming parlour for those breeds that require regular professional attention.



Fig. 3: *When it is well handled, the school run can be an ideal way of broadening a puppy's horizons.*

Puppy socialisation groups

Puppy 'parties' can be an asset when those in charge have the necessary knowledge, experience and support to ensure such meetings fulfil their aims of broadening socialisation experiences and creating positive associations with unfamiliar people and other dogs (youngsters and adults). Where control is poor and/or intimidation of timid puppies by bolder individuals occurs, fearful reactions, which undermine future relationships, may develop.

Additional issues

Bearing these significant behavioural factors in mind when puppies are first presented to the veterinary clinic it is essential to ask new owners the right questions. At this early stage it can already be difficult to make up for experiential deficiencies when pups come from poor sources. However, identifying relatively minor issues and offering good quality solutions can be instrumental in avoiding many commonly encountered canine behaviour problems. For example owners can be impressed by hygienic, purpose built premises but unaware of the behavioural disadvantages of their environmental sterility. When puppies that did not meet children in the early weeks at their breeding establishments belong to people planning families at a later date, it is crucial to carefully and systematically instigate an appropriate socialisation programme to avoid future problems.

CANINE GROUPS NEED INDIVIDUAL ATTENTION

Other management issues often overlooked in multi-dog homes are:

- The importance of owners applying different management regimes that take account of the varying needs in terms of physical exercise and mental stimulation of their pets. Where there is a marked discrepancy in age, this can lead to a range of behaviour problems associated with boredom and frustration in young dogs subjected to husbandry suitable for a much older pet.
- The need to train young dogs separately from their older canine companions. Otherwise their poor compliance with commands can be masked by the speedy response of the other dog.
- The need for newcomers to be prepared in advance for the loss of the original dog - severe distress and anxiety related behaviours can later develop when a second dog that has never been alone suddenly experiences life as the only pet.