

Puppy head starts

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There are scarce areas of perfect agreement among those in the field of dog behaviour, but one issue stands in sharp contrast: early intervention. Socialize your puppy and start training him the moment you get him home. I sometimes worry that we hear this so often we've gotten jaded and so don't treat this maxim quite so urgently as we might. Kind of knowledge and good intentions substituting for action. So, if you have a puppy, time to get busy-busy!

SOCIALIZATION

All animals are inclined toward "neophobia," the tendency to react fearfully to new things. And animals that are afraid engage in fight or flight, which we humans universally hate. The process of domestication dulls neophobia – its primary aim, in fact – but puppies not socialized to a wide volume and variety of strangers are at colossal risk of ending up fearful and aggressive to unfamiliar people. The technology to successfully treat adult dogs that are uncomfortable around strangers does not approach the technology we have to help dogs with other problems like disobedience, house-soiling, resource guarding or other naughtiness. This makes prevention – in the form of careful breeding for gregariousness and strong socialization programs – absolutely critical.

The earlier you start, the better. While nobody can say for certain exactly when time is up for a particular dog, there is good agreement that one is pushing one's luck once the pup is in the three-to-four-month range. Since dogs are sensitive to differences among people, socialization also needs to be wide-ranging. The regrets of people whose dogs freak out at sunglasses, like adults but not children, are fine with older children but not toddlers, spook at beards or backpacks, and on and on are legion. People start out with good intentions but have hectic lives and procrastinate or else put their heads in the sand and the next thing they know, the dog is five months old and edgy around men.

SOCIALIZATION CHECK-LIST

So vow to not miss the boat! Expose your puppy over and over to:

- men, including those with all manner of facial hair; women, children of all ages;
- babies, strollers, carriages, baby bags, baby smells, baby sounds;
- people wearing hats, sunglasses, backpacks, iPods;
- kid behaviour: running, skipping, playing, laughing, screaming; children in large unruly groups, wielding implements and on playground equipment;
- people with unusual gaits, using wheelchairs and canes, on bicycles;
- people appearing at windows, emerging from elevator doors and cars, 'decapitated' people looking over four-foot fences, etc.

OVER AND OVER

The "over and over" part is not a frill. A single exposure or two, especially if of fleeting duration and not in very close, interactive proximity, is an extremely small drop in the bucket. Ian Dunbar has advised people to not buy puppies from breeders who do not count the number of visitors to the litter in the hundreds, all of whom have handled, snuggled and played with the puppies! And this all before the age of eight weeks. Once again, remember the terrific agreement that more is better and that the earlier the better. Observe proper hygiene until the puppy is fully vaccinated and released from quarantine by your veterinarian: visitors must remove shoes and wash hands, and puppies should not be put on the ground outside (or the floor of veterinary waiting rooms), or exposed to dogs of unknown vaccination status, or dog feces.

STRANGER DANGER

Some dogs seem at particularly high risk for developing issues with strangers. In the case of a purebred dog, read the breed standard and look for euphemisms such as "aloof," "discerning with strangers," "one-family dog," "standoffish," etc. These terms mean one thing: more difficult to socialize to strangers. Ask how high a priority it is for you to have a dog that's friendly to unfamiliar people. If it's high, consider a breed bred for greater gregariousness.

Meet both parents of your prospective puppy. Do they immediately approach and greet you, wagging and friendly? If not, again ask yourself whether this is something you can live with, if even heroic efforts at socialization collide with a low genetic ceiling. One of the advantages of adopting an adult dog is the ability to audition him and gauge his stranger friendliness.

If you already have a shy, standoffish or growly-with-some-people puppy, pull out all the stops. It's no longer a prevention issue but an emergency. Whatever the problematic category of people is, strive for daily exposure to

them. Reduce the puppy's meal ration and recruit people to hand-feed him super rare and tasty morsels. Do it every day, preferably twice or three times. Your goal is for your puppy to love these strangers. If you succeed – and volume is a big determinant – you'll have 12 to 15 years of a stranger-friendly dog. If you fail, you could end up with a fear or aggression problem in an adult dog. No excuses: DefCon IV socialization, starting today.

EARLY OBEDIENCE

While socialization far and away eclipses other concerns because of its extreme time sensitivity, it can be advantageous to emphasize manners or particular obedience behaviours for some dogs. For instance, explosive and active bull-in-china-shop types, such as Labradors, can be taught that "direct access" strategies (helping himself to laundry items, your lunch or pulling on leash toward that divine scent in the bushes) simply don't work. Arrange some "weird physics," i.e., that the way to get access to what's over there is to sit quietly over here, or that the way to reach a destination on leash is to walk slower, not faster.

Get yourself any one of the fabulous training books or videos on the market and emphasize "Wait," "Stay," "Leave it" and loose-leash walking. A good enough frontal assault on these impulse-control exercises can result in a fastidiously polite adult dog, as he learns that obedience is the key to getting stuff. Most dogs left to everyday living learn, in spite of our greatest intentions, that rude, naughty behaviour often works. Disaster!

BODY HANDLING

Audition your puppy for all patting and procedures that his future life will entail. This will vary depending on his coat needs, but be static for most dogs vis-à-vis:

- restraint – being held in position for grooming, veterinary exams, etc.;
- being hugged – by adults and children;
- brushing and bathing;
- feet and nails – restraint, handling and conservative nail trimming with sharp trimmers;
- teeth-, eye- and ear-checking, and pilling – pill him daily with a piece of cheese for two weeks, then for another two weeks pill him with a vitamin or supplement followed by a cheese chaser and you will have a pillable dog for life;
- patting;
- facial proximity – include eyeball-to-eyeball contact and blowing in the puppy's face, followed by cheese from the person's mouth to the puppy's mouth to proof against spooking and snapping when, inevitably, some person does one of these to your adult dog.

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