**Making the most of Puppy Socialisation**

***You may never get this time back – act now to build your puppies confidence!***

Socialisation involves meeting and having pleasant encounters with many adults, children, dogs (puppies and adults), and other animals.

Puppies also need to get used to a wide range of events, environments and situations.

**A puppy’s first year is very important.**

Puppies that are well socialised grow up to be friendly and happy with people and other animals, and make wonderful pets. Dogs that were taken out regularly as puppies can take different situations in their stride and enjoy going anywhere with their owners. Dogs that like people can be taken anywhere and live life to the full.

During the early weeks (up to approx 8weeks), a puppy will approach anything or anybody willingly and without fear. After this time they gradually become more cautious. Therefore, it is vital that a puppy meets a wide variety of people, situations and other animals as soon as possible.

Puppies usually go to their new homes from the age of 6-8 weeks. This means that you should make a real effort to socialise your new puppy well during your first few months together. Socialisation after this time is also necessary to build on the foundation or to make up for lost time, particularly if your puppy was not socialised adequately in the litter, or was unwell.

**When your puppy arrived they should be confident, little individuals. Ready to have a try at anything. If this is not the case and your puppy is shy, nervous or apprehensive then they will need some extra socialization and this will need to happen sooner rather than later. Speak to your instructor quickly to get this started.**

Take your puppy out and about, taking care not to overwhelm him and, to keep him safe from infectious diseases. Begin slowly at first; gradually increasing the number of encounters and the time spent socialising as your puppy becomes older and more able to cope. Since it is particularly necessary for pet dogs to enjoy the company of humans, it is important that he meets a lot of them, especially children of all ages. Take your puppy to them, and invite them round to your house.

**‘Think puppy’**

Keep your puppy happy by giving strangers small tasty tit-bits to feed, or by passing them a favourite toy so they can play together. Think ahead and try to prevent unpleasant events. Arrange for all encounters to be successful and rewarding. Remember that young puppies tire easily, so keep encounters short, with enough time in between for resting.

**Areas to work on**

**Adults and children:** Meeting adults and children is the most important item on the list. The more people your puppy meets and plays with, the better. All ages and temperaments of adults and children need to be encountered. This is not usually too difficult, but you will need to make the effort to do so. Get strangers to give your puppy treats to make the meeting new people experience a positive one. Make sure they don’t overwhelm your puppy.

Ensure your puppy has happy encounters with veterinary surgery staff (who, one day, may need to handle your dog in an emergency).

All life situations: Every situation your dog needs to be able to deal with in life requires training and practice for example, grooming, being handled, being picked up, being bathed, coping with car travel etc. if you never subject your puppy to this during the first 6 months, what makes you think they will be happy with it the first time they experience it?

**Other dogs and puppies**

**A good puppy socialisation class or puppy party** helps with socialising and training. Puppies are usually admitted between the ages of 12-20 weeks and the entire family is encouraged to go so that all the puppies meet a wide variety of adults and children.

Make sure your puppy has at least 100 positive encounters with sensible, calm and sociable dogs before they are 6 months old. These encounters need to be on lead and off lead, if you only concentrate on one method they will be great off lead and awful on lead and vice versa.

**Nervous Puppies**

Will require more socialisation than more confident ones, if your puppy is apprehensive you have some work to do to make sure he grows up into a happy, friendly puppy. Beware puppies that shy away from new situations have a greater chance of developing fear aggression as they mature. Shying away can turn into lunging, barking and possibly biting. You can tackle nervousness and teach your puppy to overcome it but only if you are willing to put some time and effort into socialisation.

If you do nothing your puppy will only get worse over time. Spend 12 months of hard work teaching your puppy how to cope with life in the real world and have 10years of a wonderful dog. If you neglect the first 12 months you will have 10years of hell with a very stressed dog.

**Things that can be done at home**

**Visitors:** Accustom your puppy to lots of visitors of both sexes and all ages. This will develop its social experience and help to keep territorial behaviour to manageable levels in later life. Ensure your visitors only say "Hello” and fuss your puppy once it has got over its initial excitement so as to prevent the development of boisterous greeting behaviour.

**Children:** Accustom your puppy to being handled by your and/or visitor's children, but don't let them pester it or treat it as a toy. Remain in a position of supervision. Arrange to meet someone with a baby regularly, especially if you plan to have a family. This will help to overcome the common worries about how the family dog will react to a new baby and toddlers.

**Feeding:** Accustom your puppy to you and other members of your family adding food to its bowl when it is eating. This will teach it that you are not a threat and prevent the development of aggression over food when it is older. Teaching your puppy that you can take its food away when it is eating is a bad idea, as this approach can cause the development of defensive behaviour later in life.

**Grooming:** Groom your puppy every day, even smooth or wire haired breeds who may not seem to need it. Grooming will accustom your puppy to being thoroughly handled and coincidentally it will help prevent the development of dominant behaviours.

**Veterinary Examination:** Every day examine your puppy's ears, eyes, teeth, lift up its feet and check its paws and check under its tail. When your puppy is happy about this, get other people to do it (it makes a good talking point at dinner parties!) The purpose of the exercise is to accustom your puppy to veterinary examination, very important, especially if first-aid ever has to be administered.

**Domestic sights and sounds:** Expose your puppy to domestic stimuli such as the vacuum cleaner, spin drier etc. but don't make an issue of them. The puppy should get used to them gradually without being stressed.

**The postman and milkman etc.:** Carry your puppy and meet these people as often as you can. If your puppy gets to know and like them and more importantly learns that they will not "runaway" if it barks, it is far less likely to show territorial aggression towards them when it grows up. (Many householders have to collect their post from the sorting office because the postman will not deliver as a result of their dog's behaviour).

**Cats**: If you have one introduce your puppy to it. Keep the puppy under control and reward it for not pestering. Be careful not to worry the cat, as it may scratch your puppy. Placing the cat in a cat carrying basket just out of the puppy's reach can be a useful method of introduction with little chance of an unpleasant incident occurring. This can be repeated after a few days so that both puppy and cat learn to become settled in each other's company.

**Other dogs at home:** If you already have a dog introduce your puppy to it in the garden. Once the initial acceptance has been made by the older dog, the two should find their own level and settle down without too much intervention from you. If your older dog doesn’t tolerate your puppy, don’t leave them to sort it out themselves, separate them unless you are there to supervise. Have your puppy on a lead, so they can’t harass your older dog.

**Lead training:** Prepare your puppy for walking on the lead by getting it used to its collar and lead in the garden.

**Home Alone:** Socialisation is very important, but so is learning to be alone. Puppies who are not accustomed to being left unattended on a regular basis are much more likely to suffer from separation anxiety (i.e. become anxious when separated from the owner) in adulthood. The three main symptoms of separation anxiety are destructiveness, incessant howling or barking and loss of toilet control.

To help prevent your puppy from suffering from this very common syndrome, you need to leave it unattended (i.e. in the house on its own) for over an hour on most days, preferably in the area that it sleeps in overnight, which should not be your bedroom, as sleeping there can contribute to separation anxiety and other problems.

For your puppy's safety, to prevent it from toileting in inappropriate places, chewing inappropriate items etc. ensure its area is "chew proof" and free from hazards such as electrical cables etc. You may need to construct or buy some purpose-built barriers to make a pen. Indoor kennels are often used and are readily available. Leave your puppy with some appropriate chew items, such as long lasting chews from the pet shop, and fresh water.

Initially you should accustom your puppy to you sitting in another room, with the door between you open. Over a period of time the routine can be carried out with the door shut. Once your puppy accepts this you can start to leave the house; go next door for a coffee, for example. Gradually extend the time you are away until you are absent for over an hour on a regular basis. Do not go back if you hear your puppy crying. Return when it is quiet. If a puppy thinks it can "call you back “ it may never accept being left.

Be very matter of fact about going out and coming home. If you fuss your puppy before leaving you will unsettle it and make it want to be with you every moment you want your absence to be accepted. (There is nothing in dog language for "Bye-bye, see you later" . Any interaction means, "Let's go!") Too much fuss on returning home highlights the loneliness of your absence.

**Things to do away from home**

Go to all the environments you can think of that will help your puppy become "bomb proof" . Start in quieter places and gradually find busier ones.

**The street:** Expose your puppy to the sound of traffic and the movement of people. Start in quiet side streets and gradually build up to busy ones.

**Places where people congregate:** Any environment where people tend to congregate to sit and chat will do, so that they have the time to take interest in and handle your puppy.

**Children's play areas:** This is obviously a good place to meet lots of children (but consult your veterinary surgeon about the appropriate worming programme before bringing your puppy in contact with children). Children should not talk to strangers, so make arrangements with their mothers. Start with just a few children and control their enthusiasm to prevent your puppy from being overwhelmed, which can easily happen.

**The car:** Plenty of car travel will accustom your puppy to it and help prevent car sickness. Do not let your puppy sit on the front seat or on someone's lap. Accustom it to travelling in the place it will occupy when it is an adult.

**The countryside:** Accustom your puppy to the sights, sounds and smells of the countryside and livestock etc. (in your enthusiasm don't forget the Country Code).

**Lead training:** Once your veterinary surgeon has said that your puppy can be safely walked on a lead instead of carried, carry on as before but go back to using quiet areas, then gradually build up to noisy and busy ones again. In addition think about the unusual places to which you can accustom your puppy, for example, open staircases can be a problem, as can the vibration of station platforms when trains arrive or the movement of the floors on trains, buses and lifts. In the countryside keep your puppy on a lead and reward it for staying with you and ignoring livestock.

**Socialising with other dogs**

Removing a puppy from its dam and litter mates at six weeks is ideal in terms of socialising it with people but its socialisation with other dogs stops. As already discussed, socialisation will wear off, which means that some steps have to be taken to ensure that the process of learning to interact with others dogs continues if owning a maladjusted puppy is to be avoided. However, socialising with other dogs does not entail allowing your puppy to run amok with other dogs in the park. If they, the other dogs, are not properly socialised with their own, interactive and communication skills may be poor, which can often result in a misunderstanding and aggression. This sort of encounter could result in the puppy learning to be aggressive towards other dogs. If you go to any town park on a Sunday afternoon you will see plenty of dogs not getting on simply because they cannot communicate properly.

In order that their puppy's canine interaction skills can be properly developed, it is very important for puppy owners to locate and attend one of the increasingly popular puppy socialisation classes, even if it means travelling some distance to get there.

**Finally, what should you do if a puppy shows fear whilst it is being socialised/habituated?**

(a) Do not overreact. As "pack leader” you should appear to be unaffected and unworried so as to "set an example” .

(b) Do not try to pressure a puppy into approaching the item as you will highlight its fear by drawing its attention to it.

(c) Expose the puppy to the type of stimulus that worried it as often as possible, but initially from a distance (i.e. reduce the size of the stimulus) so that the puppy can become desensitised to it. As the puppy's reaction improves you can gradually increase the amount of stimuli.

(d) Reward the puppy every time it does not react to the stimuli, or as soon as it recovers from its fright if it does react.