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**THE ASSOCIATION OF
PET DOG TRAINERS, INC.**
150 EXECUTIVE CENTER DRIVE,
BOX 35
GREENVILLE, SC 29615
VOICE: 800-PET-DOGS
E-MAIL: INFORMATION@APDT.COM
WEB SITE: WWW.APDT.COM

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The APDT Chronicle of the Dog Presents

The Puppy Issue

*A discussion of puppy development and the trainer's role in
ensuring behaviorally sound adult dogs.*

The Old Fears of Puppy Socialization: Let it Go!

By Pia Silvani, CPDT

"Should we get a puppy?" I asked my husband. The empty crates are in the basement, carefree days with no concerns about open doors and missing dogs, uninterrupted restful nights, and active canine vacations, with hiking, swimming, and no leashes! Were we ready to take the plunge?

In June a little bundle of cuteness danced into our lives. She's everything we could have hoped for—fearless, joyous, curious, and confident. Will this last? How many times have we lectured to our clients about the importance of socialization? We certainly want everlasting good spirit and "glee" for her.

Between the ages of three to 16 weeks, the average puppy will learn more than in her entire lifetime. What occurs during this critical period has an everlasting emotional and cognitive effect on the dog. What frightens me is

the fact that we only had control over a certain portion of this critical socialization time. Guinn came home at seven weeks (49 days). We only had the back-end of the period to work with. We, the professionals, are the ultimate consumers: we select a good breeder,

put faith in their knowledge about the proper raising of the litter, and we are careful in selecting the right pup. But what about average pet owners? Are they still picking the quiet one in the corner?

Development

Puppies are pretty helpless for the first 12 days of their life during the neonatal period. Their eyes and ears are not yet open and their motor capabilities are limited. The majority of their time is spent nursing and sleeping, and behavior is mostly reflexive. If puppies are handled and exposed to mild environmental stressors during this period, it can have a positive impact on them

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in later years. Pups left undisturbed can be emotionally reactive when they reach adulthood.

Pups begin to develop their motor skills during the transitional period (12-21 days). They begin to walk unsteadily, can eat soft meals once their first teeth come in and emerge into the world with an amplified amount of social and environmental stimulation.

From 21-84 days, a puppy's socialization period begins. It is a sensitive period in the dog's developmental stages. This is the optimal time for them to experience and learn without being fearful.

Between three to five weeks pups go through the primary socialization stage where a great deal of learning occurs. Much of this learning establishes a foundation for behavior patterns (good and bad!) later in life. Insufficient socialization during this time can lead to hyperactivity, over-reactivity, emotional rigidity, anxiety and more. They may have problems with separation and exhibit fear or aggression toward strangers. When separated from the litter during this period, many pups are intolerant of other dogs later in life.

The secondary socialization period (six to 12 weeks) is the "process of bonding and social conditioning within the context of the human domestic environment ..." (Lindsay, 2000)

As we've learned from the experts over the years, it is critical that puppies are provided with adequate social contact and as much exposure to as many things in the environment as possible during the socialization period. Having this

knowledge can assist us in educating not only pet owners, but also other animal professionals, about the importance of developing good social contacts with pups. A pup will develop abnormally if the environment does not provide her with sufficient or adequate experience. When you see a potential problem, don't ignore it because you don't want to hurt the client's feelings.

The Issue of Poor Socialization

When asked to write this article, timing could not have been more perfect, with the new addition to our family. Furthermore, I had just received the July 2004 issue of *The Whole Dog Journal* where Nancy

"When you see a potential problem, don't ignore it because you don't want to hurt the client's feelings."

Kerns interviewed Dr. Ian Dunbar on this topic. Seeing puppies entering classes at 16 weeks with problems has bothered me for some time now. I wholeheartedly concur with what Dr. Dunbar expressed.

For the past years, I've been observing pups that have experienced what I perceive as poor socialization. The pups were probably deprived of early environmental exposures since they appeared to have unusual deficits and/or dysfunctional behaviors. If a puppy is isolated from the world early on, she will have difficulty enjoying companionships; she may exhibit distrust or even extreme fear of any

social contact and appear to have behavioral disabilities. These dogs typically will exhibit poor learning and problem-solving abilities and are unable to cope since fear or avoidance overrides all.

Research has shown us that with concentrated remedial socialization, some pups can regain some tranquility, yet they may never reach their full potential had things been handled correctly from the onset. Many of these pups are entering the households of novice pet owners who are inexperienced technicians and not educated in canine social behavior.

Solutions

I asked myself three questions:

(1) What should breeders be doing to make our jobs easier and give pet owners what they are looking for—a well-balanced puppy!

(2) Why are we, the pet professionals, not on the same page about socialization and how can we get there? Pet owners are receiving conflicting advice from breeders, veterinarians, and trainers. Instead of helping them, we're making their heads spin!

(3) What information should breeders and veterinarians give out in every puppy packet so clients are better informed about what socialization means and signs to look for that may cause potential future problems? As we know, without taking a pro-active approach, the behaviors will "not go away with time" and are not simply "puppy behaviors."

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What Breeders Can Do

Breeders are with puppies from birth giving them an opportunity to take advantage of early learning.

By following some of the suggestions I've listed below, breeders can have an enormous impact on the future of the pups.

- At about three weeks of age, expose the pups to other friendly, healthy dogs and by five weeks, people.
- Take car trips, especially to the veterinarian's office. The pup's first experience with the veterinarian should not be a cold, motorized table and needle in the rump. Acclimate the pup to the motion of cars to avoid car sickness.
- Gradually expose them to different sounds starting at low levels (doorbells, vacuums, hair dryers, vehicles, horns, barking dogs, kids playing, etc.)
- Separate pups from their litter for short periods of time to help accustom them to being alone. What a shock to them after sleeping with seven siblings to then be put alone in a crate in a dark kitchen!
- Acclimate the pups to various substrates.
- Between five to eight weeks, familiarize the pup to grooming tools, ear cleaning, drinking and eating from a bowl, training with treats, wearing collars, leash walking, and much more.
- Acclimate pups to crates and pens, leaving the pup with a "puppy pal" (soft toy to cuddle with) and proper chew toys.
- Allow pups to investigate in the yard, teaching them to walk up and down a stair or two as opposed to carrying them in and out.
- Take the pups out in the rain (they're dogs for goodness sake!) How many pups have accidents during inclement weather?
- Work on housetraining to help get the new owner off to the right start.

Socialization Pros and Cons

Many veterinarians and breeders are recommending early socialization and including this learning program as part of their total wellness plan for pet owners. Yet many are not. How can we all be on the same page to help us reach a unified approach to socialization?

- Both research and findings from various guide dog organizations show that fewer than a half a dozen, out of hundreds of thousands of puppies, became ill before their final set of vaccinations. All other pups that were taken into public places became successful guide dogs.
- Dr. R.K. Anderson states: "The risk of a dog dying because of infection with distemper or parvo disease is far less than the much higher risk of a dog dying (euthanasia) because of behavior problems. Are there risks? Yes. But ten years of good experience and data, with few exceptions, offers veterinarians the opportunity to generally recommend early socialization and training classes, beginning when puppies are eight to nine weeks of age."
- Isolating these puppies until they are 16+ weeks is detrimental

to their behavioral health. Puppy classes have turned into behavior modification classes as a result.

- Purdue University Animal Behavior Clinic stresses the importance of early socialization by defining their recommendations for puppy class protocols. In their letter dated December 4, 2002, Drs. Andrew Luescher and Steve Thompson eloquently stated, "Let's welcome new puppies into our society by showing them what we expect, not dispose of them because we failed to communicate our expectations at a time when the puppies are most impressionable." A copy of this letter can be found on their Web site, www.vet.purdue.edu/animalbehavior.

Information for Puppy Packets

Veterinarians, breeders, trainers, shelters, and other animal professionals should join forces by educating pet owners about the importance of early socialization and understanding the critical development stages. Pet owners are unaware of early warning signs for potential future problems. Some suggestions might be:

- Socialization is about *positive* experiences.
- Define what normal vs. abnormal canine behavior is and what to expect as the puppy matures.
- Puppies that spend a lot of time "hiding" under furniture are not confident in their household. From what and whom are they hiding?
- Puppies that hide with their

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- bones and toys—red flag! Is the family constantly taking things from the pup's mouth? Has she now reached a threshold? Can the owner remove items from puppy's mouth without being threatened?
- The puppy rarely responds to her name or other cues. Why?
 - The puppy is not housetrained by five months. Are the owners not watching? What else is the puppy doing?
 - The puppy does not tolerate grooming. The owner thinks the pup "fools around." Is it fooling around or becoming agitated?
 - Neither the veterinarian nor groomer can handle the pup.
 - The puppy is not enjoying socialization class (hiding, running away, quivering). Not all puppies

belong in a puppy class and may not get over it.

- The puppy is threatening while eating. To whom or what are the threats directed? Let's not wait until a bite occurs!
 - The pup has no interest in people or dogs, or avoids one more than the other.
 - The pup has curled her lip, growled, snarled, or snapped at other dogs, children or adults. When and in what context?
 - The pup is extremely timid when introduced to new people.
 - Avoid dog parks and other areas where pups may become frightened by unsocialized adult dogs.
- If we can join forces with our colleagues now, perhaps we can hope to see fewer problems in the coming years.

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Pia Silvani is past Vice President of the APDT and a member of the CCPDT. She routinely lectures around the country and she is the Director of Training and Behavior at St. Hubert's Animal Welfare Center in Madison, NJ. She recently completed a "virtual training" DVD and is working on a book to be published in 2005. She can be reached at psilvani@sthuberts.org.



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