



**APDT**

## Research Review

A Review of Duxbury MM, Jackson JA, Line SW, Anderson RK. (2003) Evaluation of association between retention in the home and attendance at puppy socialization classes. *JAVMA* 223(1):61-66.

by Emily Thorn

Millions of healthy dogs are relinquished to animal shelters each year. According to a 1999 study conducted by New, Salmon, and Scarlett, behavior problems are the number one reason owners give when relinquishing their pet.

New *et al* identified several factors, including lack of obedience training, that put an animal more at risk for relinquishment. The study conducted by Duxbury, Jackson, Line, and Anderson is the first to examine how attendance at a specific type of training class can affect retention in the home.

In order to evaluate how puppy socialization classes and other factors were associated with the retention of dogs in their adoptive homes, researchers surveyed owners of dogs that were adopted as puppies between June 1994 and March 2001 from the Animal Humane Society (Golden Valley, MN)

Questionnaires were mailed to owners of 428 dogs from 57 litters. Information was available for 260 of 338 dogs, producing a response rate of 77%. Those responses represented 54 litters and in 80% of these litters, responses were obtained for at least one puppy that did and did not attend humane society puppy socialization classes. After excluding 12 responses for insufficient data, the remaining 248 dogs were placed in the following groups: dogs that attended humane society puppy socialization classes

(group one), dogs that did not participate (group two), and dogs that participated in socialization classes somewhere other than the humane society (group three).

Duxbury *et al* found higher retention in the homes for dogs that participated in humane society puppy socialization classes. In addition to attending puppy socialization classes, researchers found dogs were more likely to be retained by their adoptive homes if they were female, wore headcollars as puppies, were handled frequently as puppies, were more responsive to commands, slept on or near the owner's bed, or lived in homes without young children.

In the discussion of their results, the authors note the dogs in group three could have been included in group one, but were not because, "no single approach or curriculum could be attributed to other training sources." This decision to develop a separate category for dogs attending socialization classes somewhere other than the humane society is not an attempt to compare socialization efforts of the humane society program with any other program. Rather, it is a reasonable measure to guide the authors' interpretation of survey data. Since the humane society program was standardized and the other programs were not, it is logical to reduce the impact of this common variable by creating a third group.

According to the authors, owner

education was a large component of the humane society puppy socialization classes. Owners received written and verbal information on learning theory, canine development, humane restraint, and motivational training. Owners were taught how to socialize puppies to be comfortable interacting with other puppies as well as men, women, children, and novel environments. The authors contend that owners attending humane society puppy classes develop more reasonable expectations of normal canine behavior and may be better able to resolve typical puppy behavior problems. They also suggested that owners who attend these classes have a greater perception that help is available as their dog matures.

While these findings support the call for further research and possible standardization of programs to educate owners and socialize puppies, I would argue the findings of Duxbury *et al* underscore a more salient problem in adoptive families. Dogs in homes with young children were much more likely to be relinquished than dogs in homes without young children. The results are consistent with the findings of other researchers. The authors list several specific concerns identified by homes with young children: competition for the attention of adults, unrealistic expectations of canine/child interactions (Miller et

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al, 1996; Kidd et al, 1992; Kidd et al, 1992a), and children are more likely to be bitten and injured than adults (Overall 2001).

Given this information, Duxbury and her colleagues conclude, "there is a need to educate owners that dogs are not always compatible with children. Great effort and vigilance may be required to successfully integrate a dog into a home with children or children into a home with a dog." The authors advocate pre-adoption counseling to educate owners and to help them form realistic expectations.

Fortunately, there are a number of excellent resources: *Friends for Life* (www.ddfl.org), *Great Dog Adoptions* by Sue Sternberg (www.suesternberg.com), and Emily Weiss' *Meet your Match*

(www.asPCA.org) help shelters and trainers hone their adoption counseling skills. Some trainers offer dog selection services. Whether we are private trainers or affiliated with a shelter, APDT members should be at the forefront of this drive to educate current and future dog owners. We have a professional responsibility to create and implement early intervention programs. Our livelihood and the lives of millions of dogs are at stake.

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