

Socialisation Of Puppies



Of all the periods of development the socialisation period has been given the most attention. It probably should be called a sensitive period rather than a “critical period” as this is when the dog is most sensitive to many new or novel situations. With the rapid development of Puppy Preschools and Puppy Kindies it is important that we know enough about this period to ‘First Do No Harm’. Each puppy develops at an individual rate and learns at an individual rate and this must ALWAYS be considered.

It has been established that the socialisation of puppies occurs somewhere between 4 – 12 weeks of age, although this is not as rigidly fixed as first thought. This is the time that is most important to expose the puppies to as many novel things as possible in a non-threatening way. Yet many puppies are not homed until after this age or go to homes where they may not experience a wide variety of situations. A puppy living with a sedentary elderly couple may never be exposed to children or loud noises and develop a fear of such things, translating to aggression or a phobia later.

To develop into normal, friendly and confident adults, puppies need regular handling and to be exposed to many new and novel situations. Puppies that are not exposed to other dogs during this sensitive socialisation period are likely to develop aggressive or fearful responses to other dogs later, just as puppies that are not socialised to humans often develop behavioural problems.

The puppy develops rapidly during these weeks and begins to notice its surroundings. By the time this period starts, the puppy has developed the sensory and motor abilities necessary to be aware of its surroundings and can react to them, much like an adult dog.

The puppy interacts with littermates, its mother and with humans and social relationships start. During the early part of this period the puppy is usually very willing to approach new objects, in particular moving ones, including other dogs and humans. By the time the puppy is four weeks old it has most of its repertoire of vocalisations. It can bark, whine, growl and howl and is more vocal than its ancestors.

Play barking and biting start, as does the tail wag. Throughout this period play also becomes more important and progressively more elaborate as the pup learns what is and what isn't socially acceptable (eg control of aggression or bite inhibition). If the puppy bites its playmate too hard play stops. Next time the puppy doesn't bite so hard thus the puppy learns to be less aggressive in its social interactions.

Play also allows the puppy to develop confidence, manipulative skills and learn canine body language. There is some thought that the dominance and subordination experienced during play may help pups accept rank differences later. This is essential for the pack if it is to live in harmony later.

This early socialisation period has been classified as the “critical period” for the formulation of relationships, during which even a small amount of experience can have long lasting effects. Puppies isolated from all human contact until 16 weeks of age failed to interact with each other, with humans or even play with simple toys when they first emerged from isolation. With continued contact these puppies eventually became hyperactive but showed a reluctance to have any social contact with humans or each other. Unless some socialisation occurred before 14 weeks of age, withdrawal reactions from humans were so great as to make these puppies virtually untrainable. Early isolation has been shown to cause hyperactivity; affect fear responses and can decrease learning ability.

The end of this sensitive socialisation period appears not to be rigidly fixed but it is influenced by a number of factors including what the puppy has experienced during this time, its breed and also differences among individuals within a breed. However, there are times when the puppies' behaviour is more easily modified than others and this is what can be used to advantage especially in the early training of puppies. Puppies can learn as well as adult dogs but their concentration spans are shorter.

