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Socialisation and habituation of puppies

Puppies learn which species they are and which species are friends through a process called socialisation. A puppy's sensitivity to socialisation is at its greatest between 3 and 7 weeks* during which time they can form social bonds with many different species. After about 7 weeks* the puppy's unquestioning acceptance of new species starts to taper and drops off significantly from about 12-13 weeks*. They may then be cautious, fearful or predatory towards any new species they meet after this time.



Puppies also start to develop their social skills during the socialisation period. However, rather than tapering at 7 weeks* the honing of social skills continues until the puppy reaches social maturity at 18-36 months and beyond. This enables the puppy to continue learning acceptable behaviour around people and other dogs during each developmental stage and into adulthood.

Puppies need to be socialised to many different people and dogs during this early period. If they only meet one type of person or dog they are likely to socialise to only them. It is therefore important that they meet a wide range of people of different genders, ages, appearance and behaviour. It is also important they meet other dogs of different ages and breeds for the same reason.

Habituation is the process by which a puppy becomes familiar with the sensations of everyday life. Puppies start to learn about sensations such as smell, touch and taste from the day they are born. Once they can see and hear properly at about 2-3 weeks of age they also start to learn about sounds and images.

A puppy's curiosity and desire to explore the world also starts to develop at around three weeks of age, tying in with when they become mobile. However, they don't start to feel the sensation of fear until around 9 weeks*. Any experiences they therefore have between 3 and 9 weeks* of age are normally accepted as a non-threatening part of everyday life. Then, as their ability to feel fear develops this unquestioning acceptance of new experiences wanes and the natural caution associated with fear starts to balance their uninhibited curiosity. By the age of about 13 weeks the balance between curiosity and fear is similar to that of an adult. This doesn't stop exploration and acceptance of new things but does make the puppy less accepting and explore with more care.

During the period the normal fear response is developing the puppy also learns how to cope with possibly worrying experiences. Therefore a puppy that has had lots of different experiences throughout the habituation period and for the weeks afterwards will learn to react to new experiences in a proportionate and balanced way. However, a puppy that has limited experiences during this period may fail to develop the skills to cope and may therefore react with excessive fear to new things in later life.

*Ages are subject to individual and breed differences

Socialisation and habituation programmes

Whilst it is important to protect your puppy from disease until vaccinations are complete it is equally important to make sure to provide lots of positive experiences during these sensitive periods as follows: -

- Start the programme of socialisation and habituation within a few days of puppy coming to live with you



- Take your puppy out of the house every day. Use the socialisation chart to give you ideas and keep track of the types of experiences to arrange
- Ensure all attention from strangers is gentle and positive. Try asking them to give to your puppy a treat to help teach your puppy that approach and touch from strangers is nice. Don't allow people with unvaccinated dogs or dirty hands to fuss your puppy
- Only allow your puppy on the ground in places where you know there haven't been any unvaccinated dogs or that have been thoroughly cleaned. Otherwise carry your puppy.
- Try to arrange interaction with dogs of all ages. When introducing your puppy to other dogs make sure adult dogs are vaccinated and puppies have been protected from disease in the same way as your puppy has. Adult dogs may sometimes gently correct a puppy if it is behaving badly. This usually takes the form of socially ignoring the puppy or a brief bark or growl. Try not to interfere unless you are concerned this is excessive or the dog or puppy looks fearful or distressed.



Things to watch out for when following the programme

Natural socialisation and habituation occurs as a gradual process. The puppy will start exploring beyond the nest as confidence grows and will have the safety to retreat back into it if something bothers them. They also learn what's safe and what isn't from those around them. When carrying out the programme you should therefore try to make sure: -

- Your puppy is allowed to explore at his own pace: Never push or rush your puppy to explore new sensations.
- Provide an escape for your puppy if needed.
- Observe your puppy's response to each new experience
- If your puppy shows lower level wariness or fear (see fig) give your puppy the chance to recover. Stay calm and relaxed to show there is nothing to worry about. Don't give extra attention but don't ignore your puppy either: you can ignore the fearful behaviour but not your puppy.

- If your puppy recovers quickly and naturally allow continued exploration. This experience will help develop puppy's coping skills
- If your puppy shows higher level fear take puppy away. You can then try reintroducing the new experience on another day but at a greater distance or more gently. If your puppy is still fearful or is fearful in lots of situations please contact a qualified Behaviour Counsellor as soon as possible for advice.
- Behave in a calm and relaxed way when socialising your puppy to show the new experience is safe. You can also help puppy to learn the item is harmless by exploring it yourself in a positive way.

Common signs of fear or anxiety

Low level wariness or fear in a puppy

- Licking lips or nose
- Chomping (like chewing a toffee)
- Yawning
- Hesitant or reluctant behaviour
- Seeking reassurance

Higher level fear in a puppy

- Tail lowered or between legs
- Ears flattened against head
- Refusing eye contact or turning away
- Cowering (lowering the body)
- Trembling
- Drooling
- Panting (when not hot)
- Trying to hide or escape
- Uncontrolled urinating or defecating
- Freezing (unwilling to move)

On-going socialisation

Although the first 13 weeks is the most sensitive period for learning about new things, on-going social contact and life experience is equally important to maintaining this learning. You should therefore carry on taking your puppy out to meet new people and arrange for regular social interaction with well-mannered friendly dogs as your puppy grows, so your puppy's social skills are maintained and allowed to develop into puberty and adulthood.



If you are unsure about any stage of your puppy's socialisation seek advice from a qualified Behaviour Counsellor.

Socialisation and habituation check sheet

Aim to expose your puppy to each experience once over the first two weeks. Repeat as many times as possible over the remaining 4 weeks. Maintain your puppy's exposure to a variety of experiences, especially to people and other dogs, until he reaches maturity.

Experience	7 weeks	8 weeks	9 weeks	10 weeks	11 weeks	12 weeks
Men						
Women						
Babies						
Preschool children						
School children						
Teenagers						
Elderly people						
Physically disabled people						
People with different skin colours						
People in uniforms						
People wearing hats or crash helmets						
People carrying sticks						
Approach of delivery people						
House visitors						
Other dogs						
Other puppies						
Cats						
Rabbits						
Captive birds						
Horses						
Livestock						
Car rides						
Bus or train rides						
Bicycles						
Busy towns						
Countryside						
Parks						
Grooming with a soft brush						
Examining all over body						
Escalators and lifts						
Washing machine						
TV						
Lawn mower						
Vacuum cleaner						
Thunder, fireworks, gunshot						
Cuddling and handling head and neck						