

# This Sad Mistake Sets the Stage for Relinquishment and Euthanasia

It's the canine crash course that could literally save his life — creating a lifelong buddy out of him instead of an obnoxious pest at risk for relinquishment and euthanasia. But there's a valid reason some people postpone it, and then never get around to it.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Puppies who are well-socialized are much more apt to adapt to unexpected social situations they may be exposed to when they're older
- You want your puppy to learn early how to behave, even in unexpected situations. As one expert quipped, when you decide to bring a puppy into your life, you should begin his socialization the day you bring him home
- Well-behaved dogs are created, not born. It's your responsibility to create a well-adjusted puppy so he becomes a balanced, adult dog
- Helping your puppy get used to and not startled by different sights and sounds may take patience so he knows he's safe
- The risks of a puppy's exposure to infection should be considered, but so, too, should the overwhelmingly higher risk of an unsocialized dog being sent to a shelter or euthanized for aggressive behavior several years down the road

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Several factors can determine how and when you get your puppy used to being around people, other dogs and an array of additional situations. It's called socialization, which involves experience that in a very real sense determines how your puppy will behave when he's a full-grown dog.

A puppy who's been socialized is used to being touched and handled — gently, of course — starting soon after birth and by different people. These puppies are also much more apt to adapt to an array of social situations when they're older.

Puppies should be taught early on that exploring their environment is OK and even encouraged.

Similar to young humans, the feel of snow, water and grass, and the scent and a glimpse of his favorite food — or the neighbor cat — are heady experiences, and pups, like people, react much more positively if it's not sensory overload.

During these and many other scenarios that arise, your presence should be calming and reassuring. One of the most positive aspects of puppy socialization is that while puppy owners take the journey with their pup, it strengthens their bond, and the learning that takes place as puppies play, learn and explore in safe environments.

Of course, there are several things to consider before putting your puppy "out there," such as when to do it, where to do it and who to involve for his maximum comfort and most positive learning experience.

## Proper Puppy Socialization Makes a Good Pup a Great Dog

In the ebb and flow of life, change is sometimes difficult for even the most even-tempered individuals. How much more challenging must it be for a wiggly, playful and curious puppy in a brand new place? While he's still impressionable, the first things your pup needs to be taught are daily routines, such as:

- Where his food and water dishes are
- What time of day he gets food
- Where he will sleep
- What time he'll go to bed and get up
- Where he goes to the bathroom
- What he can and cannot play with

According to Dog Star Daily,<sup>1</sup> five of the most important skills for young puppies to learn are:

- **Bite inhibition** — "Gentle jaws" are an important aspect of puppy play as well as human interaction
- **Dog handling** — Teaching puppies to enjoy being touched by people, especially children, men and strangers, is crucial
- **Reliable off-leash obedience** — Puppies should promptly obey verbal commands, even when distracted
- **House training** — Teaching them where to go is arguably one of the most desirable skills
- **Preventing hyperactivity** — Just as children learn "indoor voices," puppies need to learn that it's great to run, leap and play — outside, not inside

Helping your puppy get used to and not startled by different sights and sounds, such as the television, a passing ambulance, thunder and lightning, a bicyclist, a lawnmower and many other aspects of life you take for granted, may take patience so he knows he's safe.

Before long, you can have people over to play and interact with your puppy, especially people of different ages and genders. At intervals, play dates with other dogs and puppies, or even cats and a variety of other animals, will be helpful for him.

In addition, get your puppy used to hygiene and grooming routines — not just trips to the vet or groomer, but having her teeth brushed and fur combed and housekeeping needs like nail-trimming and ear cleaning routines may be annoying to dogs who didn't get used to that contact as a puppy.

## The Benefits of Puppy Classes

Why is it important to introduce your new puppy to an assortment of different situations early on? Because so many of them will arise that you never thought of and can't provide from your house!

Even if you have a neighborhood full of other adult dogs you won't be able to provide a dozen other breeds of puppies for your pup to learn from (especially bite inhibition). The opportunity to learn and interact with other puppies not from your little guy's litter is invaluable and nearly impossible to replicate without going to puppy class.

There are many scenarios you'll want your pup to respond appropriately to later on in life that he'll need to develop the life skills for now. Just a few examples of real-life situations you will need to help your pup gain appropriate skill sets for healthy navigation include:

- Someone tries to feed him table food
- Encountering "nosy" or unfriendly dogs
- Rambunctious children
- Taking him to a music festival
- Trips to the vet
- People who pet without permission

There are a dozen other scenarios, but you get the idea. You want your puppy to learn early how to behave, even in unexpected situations. As one expert quipped, when you decide to bring a puppy into your life, you should begin his or her socialization the day you bring him home, and the clock is ticking.

## **When 'Show Time' Starts, Make Sure It's Gradual**

If your pup hasn't had an abundance of social encounters and is raised and kept away from daily positive interaction with other puppies, dogs or people, he has no frame of reference when new situations arise. He can become skittish and fearful, or feel threatened and react defensively.

When you're looking to socialize a puppy (or a dog for that matter), it's important to start the process gradually. It's vital that the animal feels secure in his immediate environment before adventures into unknown places begins.

Unexpected stressors will naturally occur in life, but it's important your dog has a foundation of security in his relationship with you before unexpected events occur around him. Don't immediately put him in a sketchy situation if you have no idea how he'll react. This might be a dog park, a festival or a family gathering at the lake. As one trainer wrote, to do so is comparable:

*"... [T]o taking a brand-new student driver onto the interstate and then trying to explain gear shifts, turn signals and left and right pedals — all at 65 mph. It's essential to have skills under stress; therefore, you have to learn them before you're under stress."*<sup>2</sup>

Behavior problems are the No. 1 cause of dogs being taken to a shelter,<sup>3</sup> and 56% of them taken to a shelter in the U.S. are euthanized.<sup>4</sup>

Most veterinarians agree that for a puppy, their most critical developmental stage generally falls between 4 and 16 weeks. If you're unsure about whether you should enroll your pup in some kind of training class before she's undergone a full battery of vaccinations, there are a few other things to think about.

## What's More Important, Early Socialization or Timely Immunization?

According to the latest American Animal Hospital Association's (AAHA) Canine Vaccination Guidelines that came out in 2011, distemper, parvovirus and adenovirus vaccines are recommended for pups every three years. The latter two provide immunity for a minimum of five years, and the adenovirus vaccine for at least seven years.<sup>5</sup>

Every state requires rabies vaccinations every three years. For puppies, there are "core" vaccines often recommended at ages 6 weeks, 8 weeks, 10 weeks, 12 weeks, 14 weeks and 16 weeks.

A study<sup>6</sup> at California-based UC Davis School of Veterinary medicine involving around 1,000 puppies found that already-vaccinated 16-week-old or younger puppies who attended socialization classes were under no greater risk of contracting parvovirus than puppies who didn't get the vaccination.

The upshot of the study was that, because a well-socialized puppy is far more inclined to be a balanced, easy-to-get-along-with dog, opt for the class. As a matter of fact, most vets believe the risk of a partially immunized puppy contracting some type of infection while attending training classes is slim.

In fact, an unvaccinated puppy that plays and trains with over-vaccinated puppies may end up receiving a passive "booster" just by spending time with them. Dr. Kersti Seksel, managing director of Sydney Animal Behaviour Service in Sydney, Australia, and Dr. Jennifer Messer, director of the City of Ottawa Spay and Neuter Clinic in Ontario, Canada, interviewed with two other veterinary professionals on the topic.

"Well-run puppy classes undoubtedly provide the basis for happy, healthy dogs and happy owners," Seksel noted. "The risks of a puppy's exposure to infectious agents always need to be considered, but the risk of being euthanized or surrendered is much greater in unsocialized, untrained dogs than the risk of dying from infectious diseases."

Messer added, "Even with the improved efficacy of parvovirus vaccine technology developed in the mid-1990s, about 2% to 8% of puppies may not be adequately protected from parvovirus until after they have been vaccinated at 14 to 16 weeks old."

She added, "This percentage is relatively small, but it can't be ignored, and it must be balanced against the serious behavioral risks of holding puppies back from class until they are fully vaccinated."

## Considerations Regarding Vaccinating Dogs and Puppies

Vaccinations can be expensive and come with side effects. Following a recommended vaccination schedule may be overwhelming to your pet's immune system. Sadly, it's no surprise that negative reactions of small dog breeds are 10 times higher than larger ones, which suggests that standard vaccine doses are too high for smaller animals.

Canine Health Concern in the U.K. conducted a study of more than 2,000 cats and dogs and discovered a 1 in 10 risk of adverse reactions from vaccines.<sup>7</sup> This directly and grossly contradicts what is reported for adverse reactions rates. Especially for smaller dogs, the operative word to remember is that most of these are recommendations, not laws.

Then there are veterinarians who suggest that dogs get rabies, parvovirus, distemper, adenovirus, parainfluenza, leptospirosis, coronavirus, hepatitis and Lyme (borrelia) shots every year, and a kennel cough shot every six months. And there's a school of thought that vaccinating animals over and over won't harm them in any way, which is simply not always true.



Further, re-vaccinating pets that are already immune to that disease does nothing to improve the situation for unvaccinated animals, and it's pointless and even dangerous to vaccinate an animal for diseases he has already been vaccinated against. A better alternative is to have titer testing done. Truth 4 Pets explains:

*"Titer testing, also called serology and antibody testing, is a simple blood test to ensure that a dog or cat has responded to vaccination with a specific 'core' virus vaccine, for dogs specifically CDV (distemper), CPV-2 (parvovirus), CAV-2 (adenovirus-2) and RV (rabies).*

*Testing can determine if protective immunity exists in a previously vaccinated animal and establish the duration of immunity. It is a powerful tool for anyone wanting to avoid unnecessary revaccination or to ensure effective vaccination of a puppy or kitten.*

*Titer test results are currently not accepted in lieu of rabies vaccination in the U.S. although USDA rabies titer standards for dogs may be established soon ... Titer testing is generally not useful for testing for Coronavirus or Lyme disease."*<sup>8</sup>

It's best to find a well-run, puppy play group (preferably before you bring puppy home) where all of the pups have visited the vet for a wellness check and are healthy. This is the safest scenario for healthy socialization. Avoid walking in the woods (or areas where wildlife frequent) or visiting dog parks until the puppy's immune system is more developed (usually after 4 months of age).

From 6 to 16 weeks of age it's very important to find safe, fun puppy classes. Attending play groups with very young puppies has invaluable benefits. Once the puppy is old enough for "class" then begin your first positive training class. Stay in training classes until your growing dog's behavior makes you very proud (and you have absolutely no complaints about your dog's behavior).

For many dogs, this means staying in obedience classes their first year of life. It's like kids; going to the right school to unlock their innate potential early on will emotionally and mentally benefit (or harm) them years down the road; choose your trainer (and their training philosophy) wisely.

Putting the effort into early training and socialization sets the stage for the rest of your pup's life. Unsocialized and untrained dogs have a much more stressful, confusing and risky life, for all sorts of reasons. The best gift you can give your puppy is being able to adapt, understand and enjoy life with you; this occurs through intentional planning and positive training on your part. Don't let your pup down!

## Sources and References

[DVM 360 February 12, 2016 \(Archived\)](#)

<sup>1</sup> [Dog Star Daily January 5, 2009](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Karen Pryor Clicker Training February 4, 2013](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science June 4, 2010](#)

<sup>4</sup> [ASPCA 2016](#)

<sup>5</sup> [AAHA 2016 \(Archived\)](#)

<sup>6</sup> [DVM 360 November 1, 2013](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Dr. Becker's Bites 2016](#)

<sup>8</sup> [Truth 4 Pets June 7, 2012 \(Archived\)](#)