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# PUPPY SOCIALISATION: HOW TO PREPARE YOUR PUPPY FOR REAL LIFE

## FOUR EXAMPLE SITUATIONS

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**Module:** Introduction to Canine Psychology - Unit 1, Question 2

**Academic institution:** Animal Care College

**Assignment description**

‘Socialisation is a crucial key to the puppy learning to live in the human world. Outline four situations to which you would want to introduce the puppy, and briefly discuss your reasons for doing so.’

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## Introduction

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The socialisation phase lasts between roughly 4 and 12 weeks [although opinions about the exact closure of the socialisation period vary greatly, with quotes found between 11 and 18 weeks (Ref 9: Donaldson, Jean – 2008)]. The beginning of the socialisation phase is marked by the dog's adequate communication facilities, senses and brain development (Ref 11: Fogle, Bruce – 1990).

The socialisation period, or period of 'early plasticity' (Ref 9: Donaldson, Jean – 2008) is the phase in your dog's life during which it:

- Learns to form intra- and inter-specific social bonds (Ref 11: Fogle, Bruce – 1990);

**Is subject to imprinting from its environment (**

- Ref 12: Lindsay, Steven R. - 2000), thus exposed to potentially permanent traumas if encountering a very negative experience (Ref 14: Serpell, James and Jagoe, J.A. – 1995); and

**Approaches new experiences with a lesser degree of fear and caution than subsequently, wariness gradually increasing from week 5, and peaking at week 12**  
(

- Ref 12: Lindsay, Steven R. - 2000).

Socialisation is all about preparing your dog to react to most situations without fear, thus avoiding an array of future fear-related behaviour problems.

Socialisation techniques have proved to be exceedingly effective for most dogs (Ref 4: Case, Linda P. - 1999) and, given the fact that fears and phobias make up thirty percent of the behaviour problems reported to behaviourists (Ref 4: Case, Linda P. - 1999), there is little excuse for failing to integrate it to as a standard phase in your dog's training.

## **Socialisation situations**

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The following section lists four of the many specific situations to which a dog should be socialised, and why I find them important. Please note that this list is by no means exhaustive. Please note also that I refrain from making detailed suggestions about **how** to socialise the dog to these situations, as that is not the focus of the assignment.

## **Situation 1: Vehicles**

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### **What**

Your dog should get used to being not only cars, but also larger and/or louder vehicles such as tractors, motorbikes, busses and lorries. In my particular situation, I had to concentrate much of my traffic efforts on bicycles, as I live in the Netherlands but my dog was adopted as a French street dog. There are a lot less bikes in France (in most countries, for that matter!) than in Holland.

### **Why**

The reason socialisation efforts should cover vehicles is that vehicles tend to be encountered routinely by most dogs. At best dogs that are traffic-reactive are unpleasant to walk, with unwanted behaviours such as sudden jerks of the leash to get away from the noise, fear barking or rooting on the spot. At worst, your dog could bolt out of your control, and could get himself and others in danger if he gets involved in a traffic accident in his runaway panic.

## **Situation 2: Household appliances and power tools**

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### **What**

Our houses are filled to the brim with loud appliances and power tools. Off the top of my head, our dog has to contend with the dishwasher, washing machine, vacuum cleaner, microwave, leaf blower, pressure-cleaner, power drill, electric sander, chainsaw and blow-dryer.

### **Why**

These noises can sound terrifyingly loud to dogs who were not gradually desensitised to them, as their hearing is a lot more sensitive than ours. This could result in a dog cowering away, shaking, in a corner, every time you get the Hoover out, or, more annoying, a dog who pre-emptively snaps at the object of its fear, making vacuum cleaning something of an army mission.

Out of control fear-related behaviour in relation to household appliances can be downright dangerous: try sawing branches off a tree with a dog jumping and snarling against your stepladder for an adrenaline rush. In my humble opinion, the

use of power tools and household appliances is enough of a chore, without fearing for mine or my dog's life.

### **Situation 3: Grooming and care**

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#### **What**

Your dog should be socialised to the following grooming activities at least:

- Brushing;
- Towel-drying;
- Bathing (with lathering);
- Rinsing (with slow-flowing hose);
- Nail clipping;
- Nail filing;
- Inspection (with your hands) of every part of his body;
- Tick removal;
- Application on the neck of anti-parasite drops (anti-flea and ticks, for example); and
- Tooth brushing.

#### **Why**

Neglecting to get your dog used to baths, towel-drying, nail trimming and hair- and tooth-brushing can make for stressful and infrequent grooming sessions, with a knotted, smelly dog with bad teeth and uncomfortably overgrown nails to show for it. What's more, a severely grooming-reactive dog brings a risk to you (increased chance of fear-biting), or to himself (cutting into the dog's quick because he struggles or shakes so much). Apprehending your dog's fear and potential resistance, you will end up forever putting off these essential care activities, to the detriment of your dog's looks and health.

With good (reward) timing and a relaxed approach, you can turn your previously fearful dog into one that begs to be groomed in as little as ten days per activity. Having experienced both ends of that spectrum and not being a big fan of stress, I know which one I am picking.

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## Situation 4: Visit to the veterinary surgery

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### What

No matter what life your dog leads, you are more or less guaranteed that he shall need the occasional visit to the vet's. You are therefore well advised to gently and positively get your dog used to visits to the vet's surgery, and sub-elements thereof.

The dog should be used to

- The veterinary surgeons themselves (specifically their green or white uniform),
- Common veterinary handlings (such as the use of a stethoscope or an eye lamp),
- The surgery's waiting room, potentially in close proximity with other four-legged patients who may not be at their calmest.

### How (briefly)

A common mistake owners make is to allow their pet's first vaccinations to be the first visit to the surgery - Ref 11: Fogle, Bruce – 1990. This is a mistake in that their first experience at the vet's will be an unpleasant one. It would be more sensible to make short practice visits before hand, and trickle these with pleasant stimuli (e.g. games and/or treats).

You are also advised to inform the vet of your socialisation project, and to specifically ask him/her to handle your dog gently (including refraining from tapping the dog on top of its head if he is scared, as most vets erroneously do, reinforcing the fear). Some vets, out of concern for efficiency, have the habit of handling dogs rather expediently. Do inform your veterinary practitioner that you want to invest a little time now to avoid later inefficiencies.

### Why

Socialising your dog to handlings by the veterinary surgeon, to the surgery's reception and waiting room, and to the examination room proper will save you the potential embarrassment and stress of having to drag your dog in, or worse, having to muzzle him.

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## Conclusion and recommendations

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Socialisation is at once a great opportunity (most open to permanently registering experiences as safe and positive) and a great risk (optimal sensitivity to life-long trauma).

Breeders and owners frequently underestimate the importance of socialisation, resulting in a veritable epidemic of 'lemons' (i.e. dogs that are ill-adapted to life in human society), as Ian Dunbar calls them. The predictable consequences for the dogs are seen again and again as they are gradually relegated from the living room to the kitchen, to the garage, to the backyard (often tethered or caged), and eventually abandoned to the local shelter, where their behaviour issues may well result in their being judged unplaceable and being put down (Ref 8: Dunbar, Ian – 2009).

In a utopian world, shelters and breeders (of purebred or otherwise) would be subjects to legally-enforced, traceable, standards of socialisation and socialisation maintenance. The fact that the majority of people in charge of puppies do not undertake the necessary – if any - socialisation steps never ceases to baffle me. It is our responsibility as dog-educated professionals, hobbyists or academics, to spread the message about the importance of socialisation. I am hoping that this essay makes a modest contribution in that direction.

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