
PUPPY SOCIALISATION: HOW TO PREPARE YOUR PUPPY FOR REAL LIFE

FOUR EXAMPLE SITUATIONS

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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.’

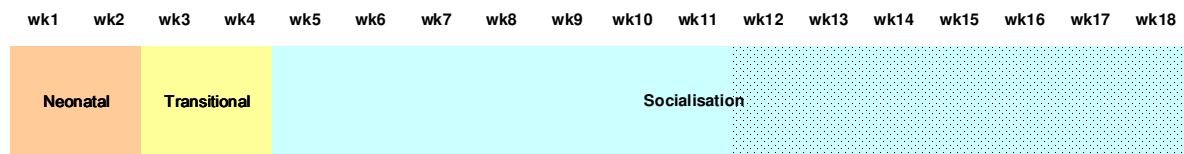
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Introduction

Critical developmental phases

When tackling the subject of puppy socialisation, it is essential to introduce basic developmental milestones. This section illustrates important phases of development in relation to a puppy's age. Please note that the ages indicated are based on an average, and actual developmental ages can vary considerably from dog to dog.



The first three development phases of a dog are (as extracted from Ref 11: Fogle, Bruce – 1990):

- **Neonatal:** 0 to 2 weeks. They are extremely dependent on their mother and can barely move off their own accord.
- **Transitional:** 2 to 4 weeks. Their eyes are starting to open and they start to open up to the world. The transitional phase officially ends when the mother weans her pups (Ref 11: Fogle, Bruce – 1990,).
- **Socialisation:** 4 to 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).

What is the socialisation period

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).

The importance of socialisation

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.

Problems associated with ill-socialisation

The consequences of poor socialisation compromise the quality of life of your dog: your dog with frequent bouts of stress, fights, fear, anxiety, panic, and punishment.

In more severe cases, ill socialisation can even lead to the dog's abandonment or even euthanasia (Ref 8: Dunbar, Ian – 2009), as it comes hand in hand with behavioural ill-adaptations such as bolting away, anxiety, targeted phobia (e.g. fear of men), generalised phobia, fear of new situations, self-mutilation and fear-biting. If severe, such behaviour problems can severely shorten the dog's life expectancy, especially if children are involved.

Not only are these behaviours a problem in themselves, but they can also have crushing financial and social consequences for your family (Ref 16: Wilde, Nicole – 2006): your dog could cause a serious traffic accident, destroy priceless furniture, run up an unaffordable veterinary bill, or worse, severely bite a child.

The joy of the bomb-proof dog

It is perhaps an obvious statement, but the calmer a dog can remain in most situations, the easier your life will be as his owner, and the more fulfilling and comfortable his life will be. A thorough and timely socialisation programme can even create that legendary 'bomb-proof' dog (Ref 15: Wilde, Nicole – 2001), that ideal dog that stays calm and collected no matter what. I have been lucky enough to own one, and it gave me invaluable peace of mind in innumerable situations.

Good socialisation practices

Most puppies experience a change of owners in the middle of this critical period, making socialisation a two-way responsibility: the breeder's and the owner's.

If you are socialising him from birth

Carmen Battaglia (respected APK judge, behaviour researcher, breeder and author), has studied the socialisation period closely. He demonstrated that regular physical manipulations from an early age create significantly more stress-resistant adult dogs (Ref 2: Battaglia, Carmen – 1994).

You are advised to regularly expose puppies to **mild** amounts of stress and a variety of new, but **safe** situations, to improve their resilience to stress and novelty in adulthood (i.e. make them less reactive and more relaxed). I emphasise on the word 'mild' as the pup could permanently associate the aversive stimulus with a seemingly random element of the situation (e.g. the presence of a black-haired man, in the living room corner, while music was playing, etc.), thus creating a life-long fear at this most critical developmental stage.

An essential part of socialisation is not only to introduce the pup to mild stress, but to plan regular and **pleasant** encounters with everything that your pup shall realistically come across as an adult. As with many training techniques, it is important that you introduce the situations calmly, positively and gradually.

The specific situations to which a dog should be socialised greatly depend on his future family settings: cattle, for example, may be an everyday feature of dog #1, while dog #2 shall never come across a cow in its life. Regardless of the dog's specific life-style, most come across the following situations, and thus must be socialised to them:

- other dogs (and/or other common pets and livestock like cats and hens) of all colours, ages, temperaments, shapes and sizes, on- and off-leash;
- humans of every age, race, corpulence (from very big to very slim), attire (think hat, uniform, etc.); mode of transport (think wheelchair, jogger, skate-boarder, cyclist or roller-blader) and gender;
- everyday objects like umbrellas, towels, opened newspapers, vacuum cleaners, brooms, etc.; and
- spending time alone or in the crate.

If you get a pup from a third party

If you are getting your dog from a third party, be it a breeder or a family, do ask the breeder what specific steps, and how often, he/she took, to socialise the pups. You are well-advised to move on if you are not entirely satisfied with the answers (Ref 7: Dunbar, Ian – 2004)

One always reassuring sign is to see a litter that was reared in a high-traffic area of the house (Ref 6: Dunbar, Ian - 1998). This means that the puppies are already used to everyday household situations and stresses. This often happens with moms and pops breeders, and less often with professional breeders. The give and take situation here is that professional breeders tend to have a much better eye than their less professional counterparts for genetic fault. So your choice of breeder remains a personal choice, but the closer a litter was reared to a true family setting the better.

Note on temperament testing

In professional circles, temperament testing for pups is famously unreliable (Ref 11: Fogle, Bruce – 1990, Ref 12: Lindsay, Steven R. - 2000). It can only be used reliably to detect aggression early. This means that a puppy with a generally relaxed demeanour at the breeder's is by no means a guarantee of a relaxed dog for life. Regardless, good socialisation can override many a dog's tendency for anxiety.

If you are adopting a shelter or rescue dog

Having been a volunteer in dog shelters for years, I am conflicted on this point, as I want as many shelter dogs as possible to find a good home, but I am bound to talk about the specific (but not unconquerable) challenges of shelter adoptees. After a prolonged period of shelter accommodation, many dogs grow 'de-socialised'. Shelters, with their staff shortages, rarely have enough personnel to provide anywhere near required human-dog interactions for the dogs. Predictably, a survey reported in Linda Case's 1999 book purports that 50% of owners of shelter-adopted dogs complain of fear-related problems in their dog (Ref 4: Case, Linda P. - 1999).

Adoptive owners are quick to imagine a past of abuse to explain abnormal fears in their shelter rescue, but more often than not, the issue lies in insufficient, or lost, socialisation (Ref 9: Donaldson, Jean – 2008).

Here here As Ian Dunbar puts it, 'Socialising a young puppy is easy and enjoyable, but socialising an adult or adolescent dog is extremely time-consuming and heart-breaking' (Ref 6: Dunbar, Ian - 1998). Bearing this in mind, the prognosis for adult de-socialised adults is a lot better than for adult dogs who were never socialised, once again making the case for the importance of early socialisation. Another difficult (re)socialisation challenge is the rehabilitation of an abused adult dog. I should advise to take this on with realism and patience, and to seek qualified help early in the process.

Socialisation is not a short-lived effort

Good socialisation practices must continue throughout the dog's life (Ref 3: Brown, Ali – 2009). In particular, two situations must be managed:

- One should actively prevent new long-lasting aversions from developing by redressing potential phobia-generating situations gently, immediately and systematically. I shall illustrate this: if a dog gets bitten by a German shepherd at a particular road bend, care should be taken to quickly, but gradually, re-introduce pleasant (in the dog's eyes) encounters at that bend and with that breed type. Classical conditioning studies suggest that, for a salient stimulus to become 'neutral' again, it should be presented more than 50% of the times without the (unpleasant) stimulus as a consequence – i.e. desensitisation (Ref 12: Lindsay, Steven R. - 2000). If you ensure that the previously fearful situation is presented with reward, you are also counter-conditioning your dog (Ref 3: Brown, Ali – 2009), making it see the previously aversive stimulus as a positive one.

- One should also consciously maintain previous socialisation efforts for infrequent, but necessary and potentially stressful situations (e.g. veterinary visits). I regularly take my dog to the veterinary practice to have him step on the scales (they have convenient dog scales) so I can keep an eye on his weight. I often take that opportunity to pop in and say hello to the vet, giving the vet a couple of treats to give my dog and topping up the positive experiences on the pleasant versus unpleasant ratio at the vet's.

On puppy classes

Since the early 1990's classes for puppies from 11 to 18 weeks started to become more popular, despite historical objections relating to the potential for disease contamination between the puppies.

Veterinarians are now going on record in support of early puppy training class attendance (Ref 9: Donaldson, Jean – 2008), asserting that, while the course of vaccinations is not complete for the first few weeks of the puppy's life, the risk of disease is relatively small when compared to the chance of death in relation to the development of a severe behaviour problem (Ref 1: AVSAB (American Veterinary Society for Animal Behaviour) – 2008). As a marginal point to the historical disease objection, the floor of the vet's practice carries more chances of infection than the puppy class' floor (Ref 11: Fogle, Bruce – 1990).

Socialisation situations

The following section lists four of the many specific situations to which a dog should be socialised, and why I find them important. This list is by no means exhaustive, as seen in *If you are socialising him from birth*.

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.

Here here Situation 1: Traffic noises

The last thing you want is a dog who freezes and cowers, or worse, bolts, at the sound of an engine. The vehicles your dog should get used to are not only cars, but also larger, closer and/or louder vehicles like tractors, motorbikes, buses, lorries and even bicycles (I live in The Netherlands, where this point is of the utmost importance). Pleasant walks can turn into a pain if the scared dog freezes every time the dreaded vehicle whizzes (or roars) by. In extreme cases, as used to happen with my own shelter rescue, the shaking and cowering dog cannot even be coaxed into moving with treat lures long after the passage of a lorry. A dog that is relaxed around heavy traffic is also less at risk to bolt in fear and thus cause a potentially dangerous traffic situation.

Situation 2: Household appliances

Our houses are filled to the brim with loud appliances and power tools. Off the top of my head, our alone dog has to contend with the following: dishwasher, washing machine, vacuum cleaner, microwave, leaf blower, pressure-cleaner, power drill, electric sander, chainsaw and blow-dryer. These noises can sound terrifyingly loud to dogs, whose hearing is a lot more sensitive than ours.

A dog that is only mildly fearful of these sounds may freeze or hide, while some will cower and shake. More unpleasant even are the ones who even bark aggressively or even nip at the appliance, and sometimes the human handler, to make the noise stop. This behaviour can be downright dangerous: try sawing branches off a tree with a dog jumping and snarling against your stepladder. In my humble opinion, the use of power tools and household appliances is enough of a chore, without my dog nipping at me.

Situation 3: Grooming

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). With good (reward) timing and a relaxed approach, you can turn your previously fearful dog into one that begs to be groomed. Having experienced both ends of that spectrum, I know which one I am picking.

Situation 4: Visit to the veterinary surgery

No matter what life your dog leads, you are more or less guaranteed that he shall need regularly visits to the vet's. A common mistake owners make is to allow its first vaccinations to be the first visit to the vet's (i.e. thoroughly unpleasant) - Ref 11: Fogle, Bruce – 1990. Instead, it is more sensible to make short practice visits before hand, and trickle these with pleasant stimuli (e.g. games and/or treats).

This will save you potential embarrassment later on, as many dogs have to be literally dragged to the examination room, and even muzzled. You are also well advised to inform the vet of your socialisation project, and to specifically ask him/her to handle your dog gently: some vets get the habit of handling dogs expediently.

Conclusion and recommendation

Socialisation is at once a great opportunity (most open to fearless exposure to new experiences, interactions and behaviours) 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, then the garage, then the backyard (often tethered or caged), and eventually abandoned to the local shelter, where they may well even be euthanized (Ref 8: Dunbar, Ian – 2009).

In a utopian world, shelters and breeders (of purebred or other dogs) would be subjects to legally-enforced standards of socialisation and socialisation maintenance. It is an eternal source of personal dismay that, despite how established the importance of socialisation is, many people in charge of puppies do not undertake sufficient steps, passing on the damaged dogs to the already strained shelter system while going on to producing the next of Ian Dunbar's infamous 'lemons'.

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