



Norfolk K9 Training



**Puppy
Socilisation**

Puppy Socialisation

At the start of their lives, all animals go through what is known as a 'sensitive development period'. During this time, they encounter the world for the first time - and learn to accept what they find.

In puppies, this period starts at birth and lasts until about 14 weeks of age. Anything a puppy experiences during that time will become part of its natural order of things. After that age, unfamiliar objects and experiences can cause a fearful response (sometimes extremely fearful) and can ultimately lead to aggression.

It is important, therefore, that the owner introduces his or her puppy to as much of the environment and lifestyle as possible, as soon as possible. Learning to interact normally with adults, children, other dogs and pets is called socialisation. The experience of household noises like appliances, cars, the countryside and city - becoming accustomed to a wide range habitats and environments - is called habituation.

How do I socialise and habituate my puppy?

Both socialisation and habituation are relatively easy to achieve. But the process does require a little thought and effort.

Over-stimulation of a very young dog can be counter-productive: in essence, you could teach a puppy to be frightened of something for the rest of its life rather than accepting it! A phased programme of socialisation and habituation is needed, with the stimuli gradually increasing in strength.

Another factor to watch is the threat of disease. Natural immunity to the common killer diseases is acquired from the mother's milk, but this fades over time - only to be replaced by the immunity stimulated by vaccinations. Until recently, vaccination regimes have prevented owners from taking the puppy out until after the sensitive period has ended.

Fortunately, with more modern vaccines this is no longer the case. Your vet will be able to advise on integrating vaccination with a solid and safe socialisation/habituation programme.

Finally, as you're most likely to acquire your new puppy from a breeder - often already half way through the sensitive period, you should check carefully how much socialisation and habituation has taken place. A puppy kept isolated in a kennel - or a puppy bred by a woman and never exposed to the scent of a man - could well experience problems later in life. As ever, you should buy with your head, and only let your heart take over later!

Why are socialisation and habituation so important?

More young adult dogs are euthanised because of behavioural problems than die from illnesses.

Unfortunately, the vast majority of these behavioural problems are brought about by poor socialisation. For example, if a puppy has never met a postman, or a child, and encounters one of these for the first time later in life, it can become extremely fearful. A natural response of a fearful dog, if it has no other means of escape, is aggression.

Proper habituation helps prevent similar problems. Imagine trying to take a dog who has never encountered a car on a journey - the poor animal will be sick with fear, and may become aggressive. And, if a puppy has not been accustomed to separation from its owners during the sensitive period, it may, in later life, bark, whine, lose toilet control or be destructive whenever it is left alone.

What are you trying to achieve by socialisation?

- Teach your puppy to enjoy the presence of people. We need to ensure that it does not matter a person's age, ethnicity, size and shape - all are fun and enjoyable
- Teach your puppy to enjoy being hugged and handled (gently restrain whilst giving high value food rewards and plenty of praise. Examine ears, paws, tail, mouth, collar grabs etc)
- Teach your puppy to enjoy giving up objects when requested – train the swap cue

Once again, it is important to continue the socialisation process in a safe and non-threatening manner. Expose the pup/dog to new people/pets and experiences and pair this exposure with a favourite food or game. If your dog is already exhibiting signs of fear and avoidance work at a distance that they feel comfortable and begin the counter conditioning process.

Counter conditioning is the process of changing an emotional state

(fear/arousal/anxiety) in regard to a trigger (something that causes the emotional state in your dog), into a more desired emotional state (relaxation) when in the presence of the trigger.

For counter conditioning to work for you there are a couple of things that you need to ensure.

The food/reward/game needs to be presented **after** the trigger (not before – as this will just result in poisoning your food/reward as this is now the predictor of the scary thing).

- The ratio for reward: trigger needs to be as close to 1:1 as possible. If the postman is a trigger for your dog, and you are only home 2 out of 5 postman days per week your dog will quickly learn that the postman is not rewarding enough, and his relaxed state only occurs on days that you are home. If this is the case, talk to your postman and provide him with treats to give to your dog - he doesn't need to hand them to the dog, just toss them over the fence as he goes by.

Socialisation Tips

Puppies are more accepting of new experiences during the socialisation period. They are more likely to be inquisitive than frightened during this time of their lives. However, if something does occur during early developmental stages, this bad experience can lead to lifelong problems.

Here are a few tips for getting the most out of your puppy's socialisation period:

- Keep a close eye on your puppy's reactions and body language. If your puppy seems frightened, tone down the activity or take a break. If your puppy is cowering, hiding or you can see the whites of his eyes, he is scared and needs to be removed from the situation. Removing a fearful pup is not rewarding the fearful behaviour, it is simply being a considerate parent.
- If you have friends with dogs that are healthy, well behaved and vaccinated, take your puppy to meet them. Ensure all interactions are safe for your puppy.
- If you have friends with children, allow your puppy to meet them and watch that interactions are gentle.
- Take your puppy with you when you go out. If your puppy is carried, he is unlikely to pick up diseases that he is not fully vaccinated against and he will feel safe if he is closely supervised.
- There are pre-prepared recordings you can use to expose your dog to noises such as storms, fireworks, balloons popping and noises that can lead to fear responses. Playing a CD like this while your puppy is eating and gradually increasing the volume can help avoid the extremely common development of a noise phobia.
- Get your pet used to being touched all over, cut his nails (just the tips, so you don't hurt him!), brush his teeth and hair, check his ears and ensure that he is used to being handled.
- Whenever you see good behaviour in your puppy, or you are training acceptance of handling and socialization, use lots of treats and praise. Ignore all the bad attention-seeking behaviour (like play-biting, barking and jumping up) and only give your dog attention when he is calm and well-behaved.

A GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY

Some breeds are more accepting of new experiences than others, even during the socialisation period. But regardless of the breed of your dog, early socialisation is the best opportunity you have to help your dog be comfortable with sharing your life fully.

Make the most of those precious few weeks, and make life better both for you and your dog for years to come

Puppy Preschool

Puppy preschool classes are a great basis for early, safe socialisation. Typically, puppy school courses run at once weekly for 4 weeks. Although they are an excellent tool and great fun, you will need to do some extra homework and socialisation on your own if you are to get the best out of your puppy.

Make sure you choose a puppy preschool that has a good reputation and involve all members of your family in the training process. Many vets, pet shops and private training organisations run puppy schools. Ideally you want a class with a variety of dogs of different sizes attending and plenty of time for supervised play.

Make a Plan

The socialisation period offers a great opportunity to get your dog comfortable with new experiences. But the socialisation window of opportunity is very brief, so to ensure that you cover all the things you need to it is useful to have a plan.

Broadly, you want to expose your dog to the following things:

- Dogs of various sizes and shapes.
- Children (make sure all interactions are supervised!).
- People with hats, beards and deep voices.
- Elderly people, men, women, dark-skinned people etc.
- Loud noises like alarms, storms and fireworks.
- Traffic, bikes, skateboards, motorcycles and things with wheels.
- Vacuum cleaners and noises in the home (fire alarm, doorbell etc)
- Balloons, umbrellas, plastic bags and
- Touching, putting on a harness, looking in ears and mouth, touching nails and general handling.

Safety First

Your puppy's socialisation period will begin and end before your puppy has completed the initial course of vaccination. However, this does not prevent socialisation, there are just a few things you need to watch out for.

- Avoid places like public dog parks or other areas that might be frequented by dogs of questionable or unknown health status.
- Puppy school is fine to attend after the first vaccination.
- If you aren't sure whether a friend's house could have been home to an unvaccinated dog in the past 2 years, avoid letting your dog sniff around on the grass or soil.
- Parvovirus does not survive well on concrete footpaths, in direct sunlight and is easily cleaned away by bleaching. So, a concrete footpath in direct sunlight is very unlikely to be a source of disease, while a park full of grass, dirt and shade is.
- If you aren't sure if the place is safe, carry your dog.
- Beaches are generally okay, just carry your dog across any park areas frequented by dogs and stick to the sand.



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