

# *Animal Progress*

Dr Sally Nixon BVSc MANZCVS (Veterinary Behaviour)

PO Box 232  
Myrtleford VIC 3737  
0423 237 057  
sallynixon@animalprogress.com  
animalprogress.com

## Healthy behavioural development for puppies

Congratulations on your new puppy! This is a handout developed to offer reliable advice to puppy owners with regard to puppy behaviour and learning.

Every animal performs behaviours as a way of interacting with the environment and others. Some animals develop behaviour problems as adults and in some cases these problems could have been prevented. It is important that owners have access to reliable, scientifically correct advice when they are first getting their puppy, so as to reduce the risk of problems when their pup grows into an adult dog (or even earlier in some cases).

If puppies have a healthy behavioural development at a very early age (starting before 12 weeks old) there can be a reduction in the risk of behaviour problems developing later in life.

Behavioural medicine is a field of veterinary science devoted to helping animals who are suffering from disorders related to a negative emotional state. Often these emotional issues cause ongoing, long-term changes in the brain that get worse over time. Due to genetic predisposition and other factors out of an owner's control, behaviour problems can still develop. Owners should not feel it is their fault that a behaviour problem has developed, but rather realise there are treatment options available. Correct early intervention to treat behaviour problems leads to a better prognosis.

Behaviour advice is available in abundance to pet owners, but not necessarily by people who are qualified to make recommendations. It can be very confusing when many people say different things. There are many who tell pet owners what they should be doing even though such people do not have an appropriate level of knowledge about the many underlying causes of behaviours an animal exhibits. Such people often do not understand the subsequent psychological and medical issues that can develop when behaviour problems are treated incorrectly.

Many dogs get abandoned to shelters every year and many get euthanased as a result of behaviour problems. Research the type of breed that will suit your lifestyle and look at the breeding facility to ensure the pup has been brought into the world in a safe and enriched environment. Ask the breeder about the behaviours of the mother and father and gauge how forthcoming the breeder is about giving information.

## What does a puppy need for a healthy behavioural development?

A puppy needs an enriching environment that offers the correct level of nutrition, comfort, social outlets, play and investigation leading to positive learning. Availability of fresh water, food, bedding, warmth, shelter, physical stimulation, mental stimulation, social stimulation and chew toys offers a pup an environment that is comfortable and stimulating.

Exposure to many different things in a positive and non-overwhelming way before 12 weeks of age is very important. Be aware that too much uncontrolled exposure may be too much for a young pup to handle and may increase the risk of fear. Exposure to too many dogs at once can actually increase the risk of problems for

some puppies. Puppies need time with every social experience to learn how to behave appropriately. When overwhelmed they may find important social learning difficult.

If you want your pup to grow into a dog who is social with other dogs, your pup should be given opportunities to meet as many different sized and different aged dogs as possible before reaching 12 weeks of age. **The experience needs to be positive for the pup and it should not be overwhelming.**

A pup that is not fully vaccinated is at higher risk of disease if exposed to parvovirus, which can live in the environment. The exposure level at a dog park or on a walk will not be known. Also, a dog park or walk may provide an experience that is too overwhelming with too many dogs, or there may be the risk that the pup meets a dog who does not know correct dog social signals and has fear aggression with other dogs.

One way to offer social experiences for pups is to visit many different homes of fully vaccinated dogs who are known to play well with unfamiliar dogs. You could also organise a few play dates among friends with 2-3 dogs at a time. Make sure you take some treats and your puppy is called away every few minutes and gets treats. Do not give the treats where the other dogs may try to muscle in and get them.

By giving this experience, you are offering your puppy a fun and safe social outlet and a very positive experience with other dogs at under 12 weeks of age. It can increase a puppy's confidence in those situations in the future. An added bonus if you are visiting friends is that the puppy is also gaining a positive experience in a new environment while meeting new people with each visit.

If your puppy is very timid and does not want to meet other dogs or people, it may have a problem and advice should be sought early. See your veterinarian about a referral.

## Training recommendations

Positive reinforcement training with an owner provides mental and social stimulation and increases the bond that forms between pup and owner. All training should be done using positive reinforcement.

Training a puppy can be done all the time simply by rewarding your pup every time he/she does something you want it to do. It should be fun for you both and can start as soon as you get your puppy.

To be sure of getting a force free, qualified positive reinforcement dog trainer, you can visit these websites:

<https://ppgaustralia.net.au/PetGuildMembers>

<https://deltainstitute.edu.au/trainers.php>

Many trainers purport to be “certified dog trainers” or “certified animal behaviourists”. The training industry is unregulated so question the trainer's qualification. Bad training advice can be detrimental to the future mental health of your pup.

## Will my dog become “dominant” if I don't teach it I'm boss?

The simple answer to this question is “no”. If you find a trainer who talks about dominance and being the pack leader, you can be sceptical as to their level of knowledge. A big problem with this idea of dominance is that trainers who think in this way often use fear and force in their techniques. Such techniques increase the risk of future behaviour problems that are more difficult to treat and there can be a reduction in the human-animal bond. Such training is not based on current science.

This is a video that has been compiled in an informative way to explain the history of the dominance style training technique:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OljMBfhyNDE&feature=youtu.be>

A good website to visit for further explanation is:

<http://www.dogwelfarecampaign.org/>

Every species uses similar styles of learning and it is easy to see why such forceful trainers could not work with a cat or a dolphin, whereas force-free trainers can teach any species.

# *Animal Progress*

Dr Sally Nixon BVSc MANZCVS (Veterinary Behaviour)

PO Box 232  
Myrtleford VIC 3737

0423 237 057

sallynixon@animalprogress.com

animalprogress.com

## Transitioning your new puppy into your home

Pups are best left with their mother until 8 weeks of age, but it is important that a new owner gets the pup at about 8 weeks old. This gives a new owner enough time before their pup is 12 weeks to help their puppy learn all about the new environment and family life it will have, as well as have positive introductions to the many things it may meet in the big, wide world.

It is a big transition for pups. They are leaving the safe haven of their mother and littermates. Luckily, puppies are generally coming into a loving new home and family and so they can learn quickly that they have come to somewhere that provides well for them: somewhere they can be very happy.

To help new owners, I have written a short list of a few things you can do to help your puppy's adjustment:

1. Buy the puppy an Adaptil™ collar and/or have an Adaptil™ diffuser plugged in at home: Adaptil™ is a synthetic version of a pheromone (hormone secreted into the air) that has the effect of making a pup feel more secure. In the natural setting, this hormone is secreted around the mammary area of the pup's mother. Studies have shown that Adaptil™ helps many puppies cope better with the transition to a new home and leaving their mother and littermates. On average, pups that have the benefit of Adaptil™ cry less in the night or when left alone.
2. Offer interactions with treats so that your pup learns that they want to come to you. Instead of going to a puppy and picking it up or hugging a puppy that might want to get away, asking the pup to come to you for a treat provides the pup with choice. Once the pup is looking for more and more interaction from you, then you can consider hugging or picking your pup up for a very short time but only when the pup gets a lot of treats and ensure the pup is enjoying the experience (if the pup is trying to get away, it is not enjoying the experience!). Pups must learn to like the way humans give affection. If not, they may find it stressful and might be more insistent about having space later in life.
3. Give the puppy space if he/she wants it. If a puppy is enjoying its own personal space, reward the behaviour with a small treat and say "good boy/girl". If the pup is resting on its bed, it may not want to be disturbed and might need a well-earned rest.
4. Ignore behaviours you don't like rather than using punishment. If you want the behaviour to stop, ask for the pup to do a different behaviour it has learned instead, then reward the behaviour that it is doing that you like.
5. If you are going to interrupt a pup while it is feeding, only do so to offer some more valued food. Some dogs place a very high value on food.