



Healthy behavioural development for puppies

Congratulations on getting your new puppy! This is a handout offering advice to puppy owners about puppy behaviour and the transition into the new world and life away from their dam and litter.

Every animal interacts with the environment and other individuals in different ways. How we care for them and respond to them can have profound effects that influence future emotional responses and behaviour. Depending on an animal's health and early life experiences, some animals develop behavioural problems as adults. In some cases, these problems could have been prevented if the dog's caregiver had access to reliable, scientifically correct advice when they first adopted their puppy.

Due to genetic predisposition, the effects in the first few weeks before adoption, as well as other factors out of an owner's control, behavioural problems can still develop. However, the risk of a behavioural problem developing can be reduced when an owner understands their puppy's behavioural, environmental and social needs, and can also understand and respond appropriately when the puppy is fearful or stressed.

Behaviour advice is available in abundance to pet owners, but often the advice is incorrect and follows long-held myths about dog behaviour. If a behavioural problem develops, early intervention should be sought by consulting the animal's veterinarian. Pain and illness are common reasons for behavioural problems.

What does a puppy need?

As the pup's new owner, you can help the puppy feel confident exploring their new environment away from the support of their dam and litter.

The first step is to make sure the home environment provides for the puppy's needs so that the puppy is comfortable and ready to explore the world. A puppy needs an environment that offers good nutrition, comfort, social outlets, play and investigation. The puppy should have access to fresh water, food, bedding, warmth, shade and shelter. Offer the puppy chew toys so that the puppy can have an outlet for chewing when needed.

Physical stimulation, mental stimulation and social stimulation should all be offered with various people. However, remember that everything is new and the puppy is learning about a lot of things that you cannot even imagine! Make sure the puppy gets plenty of downtime for naps and resting. Monitor the puppy's behaviour and allow plenty of opportunities for the pup to settle from their excitement and rest. Also, allow the puppy to engage with any new item or situation at their own pace.

Exposure to many different things in a positive and non-overwhelming way before 12 weeks of age is very important for a puppy's development. BUT - there can also be a problem when a pup is exposed to too much, too quickly! Exposure to too many dogs or people at the same time can be overwhelming so should be avoided. 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. Learn about the body language signs your pup shows and help them engage with new social situations in a way that helps them learn and enjoy the interaction.

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 a walk in a busy area where several people and dogs might approach the pup can be too overwhelming for a young puppy so should be avoided.

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.

Understanding your puppy's body language can significantly help you provide positive experiences for your puppy and be there for them when they are stressed. This website can be very helpful for learning more about the effects of fear, anxiety and stress, and how to mitigate it:

<https://www.fearfreehappyhomes.com/>

If your puppy is very timid and does not want to meet other dogs or people, it may have a problem that needs veterinary intervention so advice from your veterinarian should be sought.

Transitioning your new puppy into your home

Pups are best staying with their mother and litter until 8 weeks of age, then transitioning to the new home. This gives a new owner enough time before their pup is 12 weeks old to help their puppy learn all about the new environment and family life they will have, as well as have positive introductions to the many things they may meet in the big, wide world.

The adoption 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. They are also young enough to be forming social bonds easily so they can quickly learn that they have been adopted into a place 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. Offer interactions with treats so that your pup learns that they want to come to you.
 - Instead of going to a puppy and picking them up or hugging them, ask the pup to come to you for a treat then give them a treat. This gives the puppy a choice and helps the puppy learn to recall.
 - When the pup looks for more and more interaction from you, then you can consider hugging or picking your pup up for a very short time. Give the pup lots of treats and monitor the puppy's body language to see that the pup enjoys 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.
 - If you handle the pup, be gentle.
 - Children should not pick up or hug puppies or dogs as children have less motor control than adults and also less understanding of the dangerous consequences of rough handling.
2. Give the puppy space if they want it. If a puppy is enjoying their own personal space, reward them by whispering "good pup" in a quiet way so that they don't get up or stop what they are doing. If the pup is resting on their bed, they may not want to be disturbed and might need a well-earned rest.
3. Do not use punishment. If you want the behaviour to stop, ask for the pup to do a different behaviour they have learned instead, then reward the new behaviour that you like.
4. Avoid interrupting a puppy while the puppy is eating. If the puppy has something that they should not eat, offer something else so that the puppy drops the item that they should not have.
5. An Adaptil™ collar and/or diffuser plugged in at home may help your puppy settle in. Adaptil™ is a synthetic version of a pheromone that helps a pup feel more secure. In the natural setting, this pheromone is secreted around the mammary area of the pup's mother. Adaptil™ can help 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 during the night or when left alone.

Training recommendations

Positive reinforcement training with an owner provides mental and social stimulation and increases the bond that forms between a pup and their 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 they do something you like. Training 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://www.ppgaaustralia.net.au/owners/find>
- <https://www.deltainstitute.edu.au/find-a-trainer>

The training industry is unregulated and bad training advice can be detrimental to the future mental and physical health of your developing dog.

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 forceful techniques that elicit fear. Such techniques are not based on current science, increase the risk of future behaviour problems (including aggression) and can reduce the human-animal bond.

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=OjMBfhyNDE&feature=youtu.be>

A good handout for further explanation is:

https://avsab.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Dominance_Position_Statement_download-10-3-14.pdf

Every species uses similar styles of learning and positive reinforcement, trainers can teach any species.

AVA policy on the use of punishment and negative reinforcement in dog training:

<https://www.ava.com.au/policy-advocacy/policies/companion-animals-dog-behaviour/the-use-of-punishment-and-negative-reinforcement-in-dog-training/>