

The Value of Puppy Classes

Our topics for this week are:

- **Preparing puppies for socialization classes**
- **Expectations for meaningful puppy classes**
- **Proper puppy exposures to other animals and to children**

Preparation of Puppies for Socialization

The American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior recommends beginning socialization at seven to eight weeks of age and seven days after first vaccinations and deworming treatment. Vaccinated puppies attending socialization classes are at no greater risk of canine parvovirus infection than vaccinated puppies that do not attend those classes. However, classes should be held on surfaces that are easily cleaned and disinfected, and puppy exposure to dog parks, pet stores, or other areas that are highly trafficked by ill dogs or dogs of unknown vaccination status, or not sanitized regularly, should be avoided.

If adopted from a shelter, the puppy should be kept in their new home for two weeks before socializing with other dogs to reduce the risk of the puppy exposing other dogs to shelter-acquired diseases. Puppies should not socialize with other dogs that are sneezing, coughing, vomiting, or having diarrhea in order to reduce the risk of transmission of disease to the puppy.

Socialization should minimally include other people, children, other dogs, cats, vacuum cleaners, moving cars, bicycles, veterinary hospitals, and grooming parlors.

Puppy Classes

Well-organized puppy classes can be very helpful in socializing a weaned puppy. Ideally, puppies should be grouped by similar size. To limit distractions a group should be no more than six puppies, and each puppy should have only one or two people handling it. Puppies should never be exposed to an experience that is perceived as harmful, painful, or excessively frightening. If the puppy becomes apprehensive, its handler should give it a command and then reward it, but not pet or cuddle the puppy immediately after it acts apprehensive or it will interpret fearful actions yield rewards.

Supervised play time should be scheduled each day. The play and training sessions should be short, about 15 minutes, and only 1% improvement expected each training session. When allowed play with freedom, a puppy's distracted attention can be regained as needed by having it wear a drag line leash at least 4 feet long. Handlers should avoid sitting on the floor or

ground when playing a pup due to overstimulation of the puppy that generally results. Punitive methods, including scruff shakes, alpha rollovers, pinning to the floor, thumping the nose, swatting with rolls of paper, or shock collars should never be used for training puppies.

Socialization with humans must present the handler as a consistent, gentle leader. Interactions with humans should be gentle, not rough, and not submissive to any attempts by the puppy to dominate. Effective socialization must be one-on-one with each puppy, not as a litter. Direct attention from a handler should be only when the dog is obeying a command. When attention is shown to the dog, the dog should return with its attention.

Positive reinforcements are initially small bits of food treats which are combined with petting and other praises. Training treats for basic training should be dry for ease of handling and to prevent spoilage. Treats should also be small enough to be consumed in a couple of seconds. Food treats are gradually phased out as the dog matures and responds to other forms of praise.

Petting should be reserved as only a reward for good behavior. Withdrawal of handler attention should be the penalty for poor behavior. Fearful behavior should not be rewarded with extra attention to try to comfort it, and apprehension should not be reprimanded. Rather, the handler should have the puppy obey a familiar basic command such as “sit” and then reward it for sitting. A familiar situation, direct attention from a handler, and reward for appropriate behavior will provide distraction from its apprehension and promote a feeling of security for the puppy.

It is important for a handler to establish a superior social rank to the puppy during its socialization. This requires controlling the puppy’s resources and movements. One of the steps in acquiring higher social status is to make the puppy sit before feeding, placing hand in a food dish while it eats, and eventually feeding it a portion of its meal by hand out of a feed bowl. Puppies movements should be controlled as in being taught to sit if approached by strange people or when a stranger comes to the door. Handlers should expect a puppy to learn to wait for permission to go through doors or up and down stairs when on a leash. The handler should remain still, avoiding any attention to the puppy until its attention is directed only to the handler. The puppy should not move before the handler moves and it is given permission to move. A dog shows disrespect for a handler by putting its mouth around a hand or arm. If a puppy mouths a handler’s arms, hands, or fingers, the handler should make a high-pitched sound and ignore the pup for about a minute before returning to more interactions with it. Puppies should not leave littermates and their mother until eight weeks of age so they can better learn bite inhibition from each other.

A puppy should experience a wide variety of people, animals, and situations in nonthreatening ways during their prime socialization period. Things that make loud noise should be introduced at a distance and gradually introduced to the puppy. The puppy should be exposed at a distance to a running vacuum cleaner, motorcycles, and other noise makers in his

new home and expose again at a later time closer to the noise, and repeat. The puppy should be taken to shopping centers, parks, veterinary clinics, and other sites where there are many people and much activity. It should be taken for short but frequent rides in a car. Stops for the puppy to get out and relax should be planned. Handlers should countercondition the puppy to being brushed, bathed, inspected, and having nails clipped and teeth and ears cleaned. This is accomplished by gentle, frequent, short-term handling sessions with small food treats whenever the puppy does not react adversely to the distracting stimuli.

Instruction of Children

Handlers must always supervise interactions of puppies with other people, particularly children. Interactions need to be calm, gentle, brief, and controlled. Small children, in particular, should be closely supervised to insure against unpleasant or threatening experiences for the puppy. Children must be taught in advance to move slowly and be quiet around puppies. Although small children should learn to handle puppies in their lap gently while sitting and supervised by an adult, they should not ever pick up or carry puppies. Bites and scratches occur to children from struggling puppies and bone breaking falls occur to puppies when dropped. Children should also be advised not to bother puppies when the puppies are eating or resting in their crates.

Exposure to Other Animals

Exposure to other dogs during the socialization period should only be to good canine role models. Much is learned by puppies from observing how other dogs relate to humans and other animals.

The first socializing with other animals, should be to other dogs that are introduced to a puppy's environment. The introduced dogs should at first be of similar size, friendly, healthy, and vaccinated dogs and other puppies. Larger and smaller dogs should be introduced later. Cats that are not afraid of dogs should be introduced to the puppy.

The second stage of socialization is to take the puppy outside of its own environment to the homes of other friendly, well-behaved pets. A puppy should be socialized to any type of animal that it may come in contact with during the rest of its life which, in some cases, may include birds, horses, cattle, sheep, swine, and others.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular animal handling subjects, contact us at CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com

Now let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- 1. After a puppy is in its new permanent home for at least 2 weeks, organized puppy classes should be considered.**
- 2. Shock collars should never be used to try to train puppies.**
- 3. Ideally puppies under 16 weeks of age should be carefully exposed to the type of people, animals, and environments they will encounter during their life.**

More information on animal handling can be found in my books, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, *Concise Textbook of Small Animal Handling*, and *Concise Textbook of Large Animal Handling* all published by CRC Press and available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is provided at: www.betteranimalhandling.com . This website has more than 325 past podcasts with notes on handling of dogs, cats, other small mammals, birds, reptiles, horses, cattle, small ruminants, swine, and poultry.

Don't forget, serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.