

Handler Safety, Puppy Socialization, and Incidence of Dog Bites

Our topics for this week are:

- Socialization of puppies
- Rules for child-dog interactions
- Problems with commercial breeding of dogs
- Incidence of dog bites in the U.S.

Handler Safety

All dogs need to be exposed early in life to what their world will be like as an adult. Breeds of dogs that were selectively bred to guard property or livestock or to herd livestock were selected for an extra degree of assertiveness. It is the owner's responsibility to socialize and control dogs, particularly with aggressive tendencies.

Socialization: The Key to Handling Ability

Dogs, and other domestic species, go through an early socialization period, during which social experiences have a greater effect on the development of their temperament and behavior than if the experiences occur in later life. In dogs, this period ranges between the end of the neonatal period, at 2½ to 3 weeks (age when eyes and ears have first opened), to sometime between 12 and 14 weeks. However, others suggest that the effective period may be significantly shorter while others say that social maturity does not occur until 36 months. However, dogs that have little, or bad, experience with humans prior to 14 weeks of age rarely bond or respond to humans well for the rest of their lives. Many social and behavioral deficits observed in adult dogs may be caused by removing puppies too early from the dam and littermates. Puppies need to learn social ranking between three to eight weeks of age through play fighting, and how to interact with humans and other species from five to 12 weeks.

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. A popular Rule of 7 is often applied.

The Rule of 7s is that by 7 Weeks of Age, Pups Should Have:

1. Been on 7 types of surfaces
2. Played with 7 different objects
3. Been in 7 locations
4. Met with 7 new and different people (young, old, disabled, different races, etc.)
5. Been exposed to 7 challenges (similar to an obstacle course)
6. Eaten from 7 different types of containers
7. Eaten in 7 different locations

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's 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.

Commercially Bred (High-Volume) Puppies

There is not a uniform definition of commercial dog breeders.

One that is accepted in most states is breeding 20 or more dogs within a year. Another criterion that is often accepted to separate hobby breeders from commercial breeders is breeding more than three breeds of dogs. The American Veterinary Medical Association defines a high-volume dog breeder as any person who whelps more than six litters a year or transfers ownership of more than 50 dogs per year. Commercially bred puppies are generally at high risk of inadequate socialization.

Many states do not mandate socialization for commercially bred puppies, and those that do have vague requirements. Interstate shipment of puppies fall under Federal Regulations on the Humane Handling, Care, and Treatment of Dogs and Cats (Code of Federal Regulations, Title 9, Chapter 1) which covers animals that are on display, being shipped interstate, or used in research. However, socialization is not a requirement for interstate shipment, and interstate shipment is permissible as early as 7 weeks of age. Retail pet stores are also not required to socialize puppies. Dogs obtained from pet stores are rarely socialized properly. They have significantly more aggressiveness toward humans, including family members, and other animals; separation-related problems, and inappropriate urination and defecation problems.

Overall Incidence of Dog Bites

Each year dogs kill about 20 people in the U.S., seriously injure at least 800,000 with bite wounds serious enough to require hospital attention, and are estimated to inflict a total 4.5 million bites. Still, the risks are low considering that about 70 million dogs are kept as pets in the U.S. and that nearly all bites could be avoided with responsible care and handling.

Dog bites account for more than 1/3 of all homeowner liability claims. The average bite claim settlement is for more than \$29,000. The most dangerous dogs are larger dogs, not because they necessarily bite more often, but because their bites inflict more damage. The ability to inflict a killing bite is instinctive. What is killed is not considered food by a dog unless taught by older dogs or by starvation.

Fatal dog bites occur most often to 1- to 4-year-old children. (Fig. 4.1) Based on a U.S. Centers for Disease Control report, 90% involve an unaltered male dog and 90% of 2-year-old children were unsupervised by an adult. The dog acts alone in 68% of cases, and in 25% of killings the dog is chained. Three-fourths of biting dogs are owned by family or friends of the person bitten. Most dogs involved in a killing are in the 50 to 100 lb. weight range.

Non-fatal wounds are usually to the arms, hands, or face to children less than five years of age or adults more than 65 years of age. In addition to the puncture wounds, a large dog can generate enough pressure to cause significant crushing injuries. Tearing injuries may also occur when after making the bite and holding on, the dog often shakes its head and sometimes its whole body or the victim tries to withdraw quickly. Two-thirds of bite wounds to children occur to the head and neck. In addition to serious physical injury, dog bites can cause post-traumatic stress disorder in child victims.

Dogs involved in serious bites to humans are primarily male. Male dogs are 6.2 times more likely to bite people, and intact males are 2.6 times more likely to bite than neutered male dogs. However, once a dog develops the courage and ability to successfully bite a human, neutering has little effect in preventing future attempts to bite.

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

- Dogs most influential socialization period is 3 weeks to 3.5 months of age
- Children should be trained in proper handling of dogs and supervised when with dogs
- Commerically bred puppies are often not properly socialized
- Dog bites are most common in children and account for more than 1/3 of all homeowner liability claims

More information on animal handling is available in my book, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint* published by CRC Press. It is also available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is available at www.betteranimalhandling.com

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.