



PROMOTING PUPPY SOCIALIZATION WITH YOUR CLIENTS

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KEY MESSAGES

EDUCATING DOG OWNERS ABOUT EFFECTIVE SOCIALIZATION FOR THEIR PUPPY IS CRUCIAL

- Puppy socialization is most effective if implemented at approximately 3-16 weeks of age
- Although early puppy socialization is most effective, socialization after early puppyhood will still yield benefits.
- Exposure to a variety of social and environmental stimuli during this period is crucial for the normal social and behavioural development of puppies
- The risk of developing a disease during socialization activities for partially vaccinated puppies appears to be relatively low, whereas inadequate early puppy socialization can lead to serious behaviour, and welfare concerns
- Veterinarians are uniquely positioned to inform new puppy owners early-on about the importance of socialization and to work with the owners to develop a puppy socialization plan

STEPS TO ENGAGING PUPPY OWNERS IN A CONVERSATION ABOUT PUPPY SOCIALIZATION

1. Start the conversation by using open-ended questions to gain a broad understanding of the owner's lifestyle and the puppy's current exposures, activities and socialization needs
2. Identify the owner's current understanding of puppy socialization to ensure your information is tailored specifically to their needs
3. Verbally highlight the important messages about puppy socialization to draw your client's attention to the information and to improve their retention
4. Check in with your client to gauge their response to the information you have provided and give them the opportunity to ask clarifying questions
5. Provide a safety net (i.e., plan of action) for owners, in case the puppy socialization activities or the puppy's behaviour does not go as planned

Puppy socialization is most effective if implemented at approximately 3-16 weeks of age.





Early puppy socialization can also directly benefit veterinary staff, and improve veterinary care.

BACKGROUND

WHAT IS PUPPY SOCIALIZATION AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO YOUR CLIENTS AND TO YOUR VETERINARY PRACTICE?

- Puppy socialization involves **early exposure to a variety of different people, animals, places, and things**
- Early puppy socialization is **necessary for the development** of normal social and exploratory behaviour in dogs
- Research suggests that **inadequate puppy socialization can result in persistent fear, and sometimes aggression** in dogs
- The **critical period for socialization begins at about 3 weeks of age** when puppies become mobile and start to explore their environment
- The puppy socialization period is **generally thought to close around 12 to 16 weeks of age**

Early research on socialization examined the effects of complete isolation of puppies from humans, and found that puppies that were not exposed to humans before 14 weeks of age developed an irreversible fear of people[1]. **Although complete isolation of a puppy is unlikely, inadequate socialization involving limited exposure to particular stimuli can also have negative effects.** For example, a recent study examined adult dogs that were not exposed to children at all, or only exposed to children after 12 weeks of age[2]. When tested for interactions with a child, these dogs were more likely to respond with overexcitement or aggression unlike dogs that received regular exposure to children during the critical period. In fact, in this particular study, no dog from the group that was socialized to children during the critical period displayed overexcitement or aggression during the study. Another study found that dogs which attended puppy classes were more likely to be retained in the home than puppies that did not attend classes (90% versus 76%)[3].

Early puppy socialization can also directly benefit veterinary staff, and improve veterinary care. Visits to the veterinary clinic involve a number of new and potentially frightening things such as; unfamiliar people, environments and handling. Appropriate socialization can help prevent fear and aggression in a veterinary environment, which can make examinations and procedures more pleasant and efficient, improve opportunities for accurate diagnosis and treatment, and reduce handling-related injuries to both humans and dogs. In addition, a recent study found that many dog owners are concerned about bringing their animal to the veterinarian due to animal stress[4]. Reduced stress through socialization therefore has the potential to increase client visits and retention.

WHAT IF THE PUPPY IS OLDER THAN 16 WEEKS AND HAS ALREADY PASSED THE OPTIMAL SOCIALIZATION WINDOW?

If the optimal socialization window has been missed, owners are still encouraged to expose their puppy to as many different social and environmental stimuli as possible. The exact age at which the socialization window comes to an end is unknown and likely varies with breed. While it is best for exposure to happen as early as possible, **later exposure is better than no exposure**. Socialization in dogs older than 16 weeks will require greater time, effort, and patience to achieve the same effects. With concerted effort it should still be possible to make progress with older puppies, or even adult dogs, regardless of their age. Furthermore, it is important for owners to understand that early socialization is just the first step towards a well-adjusted dog. Positive exposure to a wide variety of people, animals, places and things should continue throughout a dog's life.

WHAT ABOUT DISEASE RISKS AND OTHER SAFETY CONCERNS?

Many veterinarians are wary about recommending socialization due to concerns about the puppy contracting a communicable disease or being accidentally injured. In reality, **the risks of a dog developing severe behaviour problems and potentially being euthanized or relinquished due to inadequate socialization are much higher than the risks of a puppy becoming seriously ill or injured during socialization**. Recent research suggests that a high proportion of companion dogs have serious behaviour problems. For example, Martinez et al. (2011) completed a study surveying behaviour problems in dogs entering a Veterinary Teaching Hospital for internal medicine and surgery referrals. The study reported that 41% of dogs had aggression towards other dogs, 21% of dogs had aggression towards people, and 52% of dogs had some form of noise phobia[5]; these are all behaviour problems that could be reduced or prevented by appropriate puppy socialization. While the risk of developing behaviour problems in dogs is high, the risk of developing diseases as a result of safe socialization activities, such as participation in puppy classes, appears to be relatively low. Stepita et al. (2013) examined the risk of contracting canine parvovirus in vaccinated puppies that attended puppy classes at < 16 weeks of age and found that out of 279 puppies that attended classes, there were no suspected or confirmed cases of parvovirus[6]. Based on current knowledge, when socialization is performed safely, the benefits appear to outweigh the risks. With this in mind, there are a number of safety precautions that should be observed to help minimize the risk:

- Prior to socialization outside the home, owners should ensure that their puppy receives their first vaccination, and then should wait one week to ensure enough time for the vaccine to take effect and provide some protection [7]
- Socialization should be conducted with safe dogs, in safe spaces where risks of disease can be controlled [7]



While it is best for exposure to happen as early as possible, later exposure is better than no exposure.



Socialization should be conducted with safe dogs, in safe spaces where risks of disease can be controlled.

SAFE DOGS:

- Healthy puppies that have, at the very least, had their first vaccination
- Fully vaccinated adult dogs that are known to be good with other dogs, and have demonstrated that they can play safely with puppies

SAFE SPACES:

- Puppy classes with appropriate cleaning practices and adequate vaccination requirements
- Quiet parks and outside spaces where unfamiliar dogs can easily be avoided
- Puppies should not be taken to off-leash dog parks or other areas with large numbers of potentially unvaccinated dogs until their vaccination series is complete
- Note that some regions have a higher than average prevalence of particular communicable diseases, in which case exposure to outside spaces and other dogs should be more carefully considered prior to complete vaccination
- It is important to be aware of seasonal variation with disease; for example, the risk of parvovirus appears to increase during the summer months [8]

WHY ARE VETERINARIANS A CRITICAL SOURCE OF INFORMATION ON SOCIALIZATION?

Puppies are generally sent home with their new families at 8-12 weeks of age, which means that there is a limited window for the new owner to ensure that their puppy is being properly socialized. While many breeders begin the socialization process before puppies go to their new homes, this is not always the case, making it possible that puppies may have missed introduction to things that they will be exposed to as a result of their new owner's lifestyle. New puppy owners are likely to schedule an appointment with their veterinarian soon after bringing their puppy home, and this first visit to your clinic provides an opportunity to initiate a discussion about socialization. Otherwise, clients and their puppies risk missing the socialization window.

Puppies show a number of different behavioural indicators of fear.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PUPPY SOCIALIZATION

WHAT SHOULD PUPPIES BE EXPOSED TO DURING EARLY SOCIALIZATION?

During early socialization, puppies need exposure to **everything that they are likely to encounter later in life including different types of people, animals, handling, environments, noises and objects**. Please refer to the Merck Socialization Kit for specific examples of exposures that owners should work towards. It is important to remind owners that their lifestyle and expectations can change during the life of their dog, and with this in mind, they should consider what additional exposures are appropriate. For example, a young client might have children 5 years from now, or an older client might require medical equipment or in-home assistance from health providers in the future.

WHAT SHOULD THE OWNER DO IF THEIR PUPPY SHOWS FEAR DURING SOCIALIZATION?

Puppies show a number of different behavioural indicators of fear [9, 10]. Things to advise your clients to watch for include the following:

- Avoiding the person or item that they are afraid of
- Adopting a crouched posture with ears back and tail tucked
- Freezing and barking at the person or item that they are afraid of
- Performing subtle behavioural cues such as paw lifting, lip licking, panting, yawning or flinching

When puppies show signs of fear, owners need to respond appropriately to reduce the response:

- Do not coddle the puppy because it might reinforce that there is something to be concerned about
- Do not punish the puppy for the behaviour, as this is likely to scare them and make the response worse
- Encourage the puppy to approach the item by using positive vocal cues and gestures, and offering things that they are motivated by like treats and toys
- Use of desensitization and counter-conditioning can be combined to counteract persistent fears
 - Desensitization involves gradually increasing the level exposure to the item
 - Counter-conditioning involves pairing items that cause fear with treats and other good things to change the emotional state of the puppy around these items

New puppy owners should be encouraged to ask lots of questions prior to selecting their puppy class.



An example protocol for a puppy that is fearful of an umbrella:

1. Place the umbrella at a distance that does not result in signs of fear, and offer treats.
2. Gradually encourage the puppy to move closer to the stimulus while offering treats. If they show signs of fear, back up a bit and go more slowly.
3. Once beside the umbrella, encourage the puppy to explore it, and then in successive steps begin picking it up and manipulating it until you can open and close it without the puppy showing signs of fear.
4. Repeat steps 1-3 over multiple occasions until the puppy no longer responds to the umbrella with fear.

Owners should be encouraged to **seek professional help if their puppy is showing exaggerated, persistent or inappropriate fear given the context, or if their puppy is beginning to show aggressive responses** in fearful situations.

HOW SHOULD OWNERS GO ABOUT SELECTING AN APPROPRIATE PUPPY CLASS?

New puppy owners should be encouraged to ask lots of questions prior to selecting their puppy class. Key things that owners should be looking for include the following:

- Requirement that all puppies have had their first vaccination
- Environment should be clean and free of potential dangers
- Focus should be on positive-reinforcement based training methods, with no use of aversive methods.
- Classes should include lots of socialization opportunities, advice for owners on basic obedience and house-training methods, and on prevention of common behaviour issues
- Owners should trust their instructor and feel comfortable asking questions
- For more information, see the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior handout, "How to Choose a Trainer" (available free of charge on the AVSAB website)

WHAT ROLE DO DOG BREEDERS PLAY IN THE SOCIALIZATION PROCESS?

Because the socialization period begins at 3 weeks of age, breeders play a critical role in starting the socialization process. Research suggests that breeders vary in their puppy socialization practices [11], so if you have breeders as clients consider engaging them in the socialization discussion to encourage best practice prior to puppy adoption. In addition, owners should be encouraged to ask their puppy breeder detailed questions about their socialization practices to ensure that their puppy is benefiting from proper socialization.

TIPS FOR COMMUNICATING WITH CLIENTS

ENGAGING CLIENTS IN A CONVERSATION ABOUT PUPPY SOCIALIZATION

When engaging a client in a conversation about puppy socialization the first goal is to gain a broad understanding of the client's lifestyle and the puppy's current experiences, including typical exposures to sounds, people, other animals and regular activities, which may be influencing their early socialization and development. Using **open-ended questions** (i.e., questions that invite the client to share information rather than provide a single-word response (i.e., yes or no)) can be a valuable tactic in exploring the puppy's current exposures and activities.

For example:

"Walk me through a typical day for (puppy's name), including the places he is likely to visit and the people and animals he is likely to meet."

Or

"Within a typical week, what are all of the places (puppy's name) will visit and what animals and people will he likely meet?"

Next, **explicitly transitioning** the conversation to puppy socialization assists in drawing the client's focus and attention to the topic. In addition, requesting permission to transition the conversation conveys respect for the client while making them an active participant in the socialization conversation.

For example:

"I would like to spend a few minutes discussing socialization activities that will benefit (puppy's name)'s normal development and help reduce the chance of him developing unwanted behaviours. Is that okay?"

Many owners are not aware that puppies need early socialization, and might not understand that the main goal of most puppy classes is socialization rather than obedience training. It can be useful to **explore the owner's current understanding** of puppy socialization before providing your client with further information. Educating owners based on their current understanding of puppy socialization ensures that we provide information to our client that is specifically tailored to their needs.



Many owners are not aware that puppies need early socialization.



Verbally highlighting the importance of certain points about puppy socialization will specifically draw your client's attention to the information.

For example:

"Before we begin, it would be valuable for me to know what your previous experience has been with puppy socialization activities."

Or

"Before we begin, what considerations have you already given to a socialization plan for (puppy's name)?"

Or

"Before we begin, tell me what you know about socializing puppies."

EDUCATING CLIENTS ABOUT PUPPY SOCIALIZATION

Identifying a puppy's current lifestyle and their owner's current understanding and thoughts about puppy socialization will ensure that we educate a client on the topic in a way that is relevant to their current knowledge base, perspective, and lifestyle. Also, **verbally highlighting** the importance of certain points about puppy socialization will specifically draw your client's attention to the information and increase their retention of that information specifically.

For example:

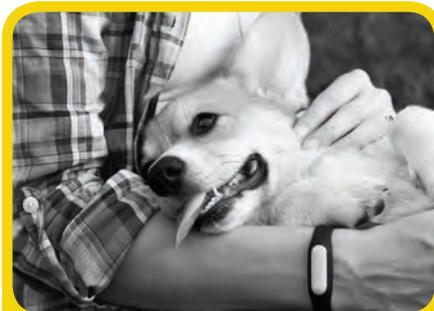
"There are three important pieces of information regarding puppy socialization that I would like you to take away from our discussion today:

- *First, we want to target the critical period for puppy socialization, which begins at about 3 weeks of age, and goes to about 12 to 16 weeks.*
- *Second, investing the time to properly socialize (puppy's name) now, will support his normal development and help reduce future behaviour problems, especially problems related to fear and aggression.*
- *Third, our socialization plan should include everything we anticipate (puppy's name) may experience throughout his life, including any potential changes you may foresee to your lifestyle or situation."*

In addition, providing clients with small **chunks of information on puppy socialization and checking in** with them before proceeding to the next piece of information ensures that we are addressing our client's specific needs and questions as we proceed.

For example:

"Before sharing more information, I want to check in with you to hear your thoughts and see what questions you may have at this point."



The final step is to outline a forward plan with your client.

CLOSING THE CONVERSATION ABOUT PUPPY SOCIALIZATION

A **final check** with your client to gauge their response to the information you have provided on puppy socialization and to provide an opportunity for your client to ask any final clarifying questions is a critical step in bringing the topic to a successful close.

For example:

“What are your thoughts on the socialization plan we have discussed for (puppy’s name)?”

Or

“What questions do you have at this point?”

In addition, providing a **safety net** for owners, in the event that the socialization activities or the puppy’s behaviour does not proceed as planned, is a valuable way of supporting clients once they have left the clinic. It reminds and empowers the owner to contact the clinic if they encounter barriers or challenges when implementing the plan. Providing a safety net reduces the chances of the client simply abandoning puppy socialization.

For example:

“If at any point you run into trouble with our plan or you have concerns about (puppy’s name)’s behaviour, please do not hesitate to give us a call and we will be happy to work with you.”

The final step is to outline a **forward plan** with your client, specifically identifying a date upon which your practice will follow-up by telephone with the client to see how the socialization plan is going and to offer answers to questions that arise over time.

For example:

“We will schedule a follow-up with you in 3 to 5 days to see how things are going. In the meantime, if you have questions or concerns please do not hesitate to give us a call.”



ADDITIONAL CLIENT-FRIENDLY RESOURCES

- Merck Puppy Socialization Kit
- Reputable websites:
 - B4 U GET A PET website: <http://b4ugetapet.ca/index.php>
 - Victoria Stilwell – Positively website, puppy section: <https://positively.com/dog-behavior/puppy-knowledge/>
 - Sophia Yin - The Art & Science Of Animal Behavior: <https://drsophiayin.com/>
- Books for puppy owners:
 - Perfect Puppy in 7 Days: How to Start Your Puppy Off Right, Sophia Yin, Cattledog Publishing, 2011
 - Decoding Your Dog: Explaining Common Dog Behaviors and How to Prevent or Change Unwanted Ones, American College of Veterinary Behaviorists, Mariner Books, 2015

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After graduating from the Ontario Veterinary College in 2001, Jason returned to the College from mixed-animal practice to complete a PhD in the area of veterinary communications in 2008. In the same year, he joined the Ontario Veterinary College as a faculty member in the Department of Population Medicine where he has established an active research program examining the role of interpersonal and team communications in the outcomes of veterinary care. In his current role, he also coordinates the clinical-communication curriculum across all 4 years of the Doctor of Veterinary Medicine program.

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