

Counseling pet owners on puppy socialization and establishing leadership

A new puppy can be a handful. But with your advice on early training, even a first-time owner can establish leadership while raising a happy, well-behaved dog.

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PROSPECTIVE PUPPY OWNERS are usually eager to learn how to select and raise their new pets. By providing information on pet selection, socialization, and early training, you can start these new owners off on the right track to fully enjoying their dogs.

Choosing the right puppy

Picking a puppy can be a challenge. To begin their search, prospective owners should familiarize themselves with the characteristics of the breeds they're interested in. Veterinarians can help owners investigate the activity levels, trainability, excitability, and aggressive tendencies of different breeds.¹ Knowing what a breed was initially bred for (e.g. hunting, herding, retrieving, guarding) is useful. And understanding which behavior problems are characteristic of certain breeds may also be helpful.² Other considerations are size, coat care, and inherited medical conditions.³ A good source for information about dog breeds is *The Perfect Puppy* by Drs. Benjamin and Lynette Hart (W.H. Freeman, New York, N.Y., 1988).

Prospective owners may get puppies from pet stores, humane shelters, or breeders in private homes. Unfortunately, pet stores and shelters usually don't have information about the early influences in a puppy's life (e.g. contact with people, early handling, the parents' temperaments, the nutrition and environment of the mother and pups). This lack of information can be a drawback when obtaining puppies from these settings because studies have shown that nutrition and social interactions in the early developmental stages can affect later behavioral development.⁴ Puppies from pet stores may have been raised under poor conditions (e.g. inadequate housing, nutrition, handling) and may be inadequately socialized. Owners should try to obtain puppies from sources that provide information on early influences in a puppy's life.

When picking an individual puppy from a litter, owners should note that predicting adult behavior based on puppy behavior is usually unreliable.^{4,5} Many factors will enter into a pet's adult behavior. Environmental factors, genetics, and breed characteristics play important roles. The behavior seen at 6 to 8 weeks of age is subject to change as the puppy matures. Still, observing a puppy and understanding its basic personality may help an owner identify areas to work on to help the puppy become a well-adjusted adult.

When first approached, a puppy may come close, run away, or do nothing. A puppy that approaches people is usually outgoing and friendly. As an adult, this puppy may be more assertive than other dogs. A puppy that doesn't readily approach people or runs away may be shy and fearful. As an adult, this puppy may be withdrawn, fearful, and uneasy in boisterous situations. A puppy that does not move toward or away from people until something distracts it from its littermates may simply be busy with something else. Also keep in mind that a puppy that does nothing may be ill.

A prospective owner may want to visit with a puppy in an isolated area away from its littermates to see how the puppy reacts. Does it readily follow the owner or allow handling of its feet, face, and other body parts? The client may also want to assess the playfulness of the puppy and its response to human interaction.⁶ Although these observations may hold only in that particular setting, they may give an owner some idea of a puppy's temperament. Meeting the bitch and stud dog may also provide information about a puppy's potential temperament.

Generally speaking, the best time to obtain a new puppy is when it is between 6 and 8 weeks of age. The puppy will have had time to be with other dogs and learn appropriate canine interactions but will still be open to new experiences.⁷ Moreover, during those first six to eight weeks the puppy should have interacted with people and been handled. And at this age, puppies are willing to bond with new people.

Bringing a new puppy home

When making the transition to a new home, a puppy needs a quiet, safe place to stay when unsupervised. This can be a small room or a crate. A comfortable crate can minimize destruction and maximize house-training efforts. A crate also protects an unsupervised puppy from injury. The crate should be big enough to accommodate the puppy as an adult.

In large-breed dogs, it may be necessary to partition the crate initially to create a small, cozy space. This can be accomplished with cardboard or wood, which can be removed as the puppy grows. When introducing a puppy to a crate, an owner should first use the crate as a resting and feeding spot and should always associate pleasant things with the crate. If the puppy cries at first, it should be kept in the crate until it is quiet, and then removed. The owner shouldn't leave the puppy in the crate for so long that it must eliminate in it. And the owner should avoid leaving food and water in the crate overnight. The puppy must have plenty of opportunities to exercise and to eliminate outdoors. A crate is not an excuse to ignore a puppy. An owner who is out of the house eight to 10 hours a day should not leave a puppy in a crate all day long. (See "How to housebreak your new puppy" on page 169.)

How do owners bond with their new puppies? As mentioned above, puppies are impressionable at this age and are willing to bond with people. What is needed for bonding is calm, patient, and consistent attention. Tell the owner to allow the puppy to become familiar with the routine for eating, voiding, and playing and to strive for positive interactions, not negative. The owner should spend a lot of time with the new puppy. One method is to leash the puppy in the room the owner is in. This allows the puppy to be with the owner yet avoid getting into trouble. The puppy should see its owner as a source of affection, interaction, and comfort. Puppies deprived of human interaction for long periods will often resort to attention-getting behaviors such as jumping up, running, and play biting.

Supervision is important when introducing a puppy to other dogs already in the family. The puppy and the other dogs should be on leashes, and the owner should organize short, supervised interactions between the dogs, separating them before they get uncomfortable. The owner should gradually increase the time the dogs are together and reward them for good behavior.

Disciplining a puppy

Young puppies are easily intimidated, and owners need to keep this in mind when disciplining them. Harsh physical punishment is unnecessary and may frighten a puppy and make it hand-shy. Properly training puppies, as described below, minimizes the need for disciplining and establishes the owner as the leader. When discipline is required, puppies are easily

corrected with noise distraction and a change in vocal intonation. Other methods of discipline used in the past have included handling exercises that mimic how dogs may physically dominate one another. If these techniques are improperly applied, they can result in resistance and possible aggression.⁶ If a puppy is too boisterous or difficult to train, the Gentle Leader®/Promise® head collar (Premier Pet Products, Richmond, Va.) and a leash can help owners keep control.

Promoting socialization

Socialization in dogs takes place between 4 and 12 weeks of age, when puppies are most receptive to certain stimuli. During this period, puppies easily make social attachments and learn how to interact with other dogs and species. Although socialization is lifelong, what happens during this early period can be crucial. At this age, an owner should expose a puppy to many new people (e.g. delivery persons, people wearing uniforms, children, infants, teenagers, elderly persons). These meetings should be pleasant; for example, the people could offer the puppy a biscuit or treat. The message conveyed to the puppy is, "Aren't these people nice, they feed me." It's also advantageous to expose the puppy to new things: stairs, elevators, different types of vehicles, umbrellas, bicycles—the list is endless. By being introduced to people and things in a calm, reassuring setting, the puppy learns to handle new situations without fear. And as an added bonus, the puppy learns to trust its owner.

During the socialization period, an owner should continue allowing the puppy to interact with adult dogs and other puppies. One good way to accomplish this is to enroll it in a puppy class once preliminary vaccinations are given. The minimum age for puppies to start a puppy class is usually 8 to 10 weeks. Most puppy classes have a play time that allows the puppies to run, chew, and jump on each other and learn the important social lessons of the dog world.

Training a puppy

Proper training helps ensure a puppy's successful transition to adulthood. In the first few months, an owner can teach a puppy tasks that will aid in controlling the dog and in establishing the owner's leadership.⁹ (See boxed text "Treating two common behavior problems in puppies.") Puppies are learning all the time, so there is no reason to delay training until a puppy is 6 months old, as was once recommended.

First, owners should teach their puppies to tolerate being handled. Owners will often need to groom or bathe their puppies, clean their ears, clip their toenails, or give them medication. If a puppy is taught early onto tolerate and even enjoy these interactions, caring for the pet will be easier. Owners should handle their puppies daily. Incorporating praise and food treats into the routine helps keep it non-threatening and enjoyable for the puppy. At the first office visit, the veterinarian or a veterinary technician can show new pet owners how to open the pet's mouth, handle its feet, look under its tail, and examine its skin. (See boxed text "First impressions are everything.") Recommend that all family members participate in this exercise. The best time to handle the puppy in this way is when it is calm and relaxed. Always end the session before the puppy is excited or tired.

Second, an owner should accustom his or her puppy to having its food and possessions touched. Dog; in the wild must guard their food to prevent its loss, but this is unnecessary in the home. Petting the puppy and handling its food bowl while the dog eats helps it learn not to feel threatened by these intrusions. The puppy will not be startled and react aggressively if something unexpected happens while it is eating. To accustom a puppy to having its possessions handled, the owner should gently take toys from the puppy, say "thank you," and return the toys. A similar technique is to take a toy or bone and offer a food treat to help the

puppy learn that when the owner takes something, it need not be negative. These techniques send the puppy the message that it is all right for people to handle its possessions and may make it easier for the owner to take things from the dog's mouth in the future.

Third, puppies must learn bite inhibition. Puppies chew on everything, including each other and people. (See "How to stop chewing problems in puppies" on page 157.) One of the things they are trying to learn is how much pressure from their jaws causes pain. Without this feedback, a puppy doesn't learn to inhibit the force of its bite. Because all dogs can and will bite at some time, this lesson is vital for human safety. How is this lesson taught? Puppies start to learn bite inhibition while with their littermates. If Puppy A bites on Puppy B too hard, Puppy B will yelp. If that doesn't work, Puppy B will leave. This sends the message to Puppy A that its bites were too hard and if it wishes to continue to play, it needs to be gentle. Owners, however, often don't send this message to their puppies. In the beginning, owners often allow their puppies to chew on them without reprimands, and the puppies assume that the behavior is acceptable. Instead, the message owners should send is that mouthing and chewing on hands are painful. To do this, usually all that is needed is for all family members to emit a sharp "yip." This sends the message to the puppy that the bites are painful. At times, the "yip" may need to be reinforced by walking away from the puppy. When consistently administered, this technique will often stop playful biting.^o

Finally, by using positive reinforcement young puppies can be taught simple obedience tasks such as sitting, lying down, and standing. Puppies have short attention spans, so training sessions should be brief but frequent (several five- to 10minute sessions interspersed throughout the day). For example, an owner can teach a puppy to sit before feeding or going outside by using a method called ***lure-reward training***. To teach a puppy to sit, hold a food treat over the puppy's nose, and slowly move it up and back over the puppy's head. As the puppy follows the food with its head, it will sit. As the puppy sits, say "sit," and reward the puppy with the treat. If the puppy lifts its front legs during this exercise, the food treat is too high. Repeat these steps until the puppy learns the meaning of "sit."

To get a puppy to lie down, lower a treat between its front paws, and say "down." The puppy will usually follow the treat and lie down. If the puppy doesn't lie all the way down, slowly push the treat backward between its paws. When the puppy lies down, give it the treat, and, of course, add "good dog." If the puppy stands up, start over.

Teach a puppy to stand on command by moving the food treat forward and away from the pup and saying "stand." These three commands can be combined (sit, down, sit, stand, down, and so on).^o When teaching these commands, always use praise, and gradually phase out food rewards.

A good puppy class will teach these commands and others. You also might recommend *How to Teach a New Dog Old Tricks* (James and Kenneth Publishers, Oakland, Calif., 1991) to new puppy owners. Early training helps get the puppy off to a good start of listening to and obeying the owner. By continuing training throughout the first year of ownership, owners establish basic good behaviors in their puppies.

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Treating two common behavior problems in puppies

Veterinarians are occasionally faced with puppies that are extremely fearful or assertive. Here are special handling techniques owners will need to integrate such puppies into their homes.

Fearfulness

These puppies are extremely afraid of multiple stimuli. Their reactions include hiding, shaking, running away, and whining. If disciplined harshly with physical reprimands, neck shakes, or extremely loud noises, these puppies may growl or bite. In some of these puppies, fearfulness may have a genetic component, which could be revealed by investigating the puppy's family history. Early experience may also contribute to fearfulness.

Tell owners to handle these puppies gently and avoid loud noises, quick movements, and harsh reprimands. Owners should encourage appropriate behaviors with positive reinforcement. And these puppies often benefit from puppy classes in which positive reinforcement is used. Such training often instills confidence in these dogs. Advise owners to expose a fearful puppy to many new circumstances in a positive manner by using a soft tone of voice and food rewards. Don't reward fearful behavior with a change in vocal intonation or body contact (e.g. petting the puppy and saying "it's OK"). Instead, owners should try using an upbeat, happy voice and encourage the puppy to relax.

Using the Gentle leader/Promise head collar will often give owners of these puppies control and will decrease the puppies' fear. When the behavior is extreme and no change is seen by 4 to 6 months of age, intervention by a veterinary behaviorist or applied animal behaviorist is recommended. Without early intervention, fear aggression may develop.

Assertiveness

Assertive puppies often show extreme play behaviors with aggressive components such as play biting, jumping, and stealing. These puppies are difficult to control and may engage in attention-seeking behaviors such as barking at owners or pawing them. When owners attempt

to physically restrain these dogs, they may be met with fierce resistance and possibly aggression.

Owners need to begin training these puppies immediately. Harsh confrontational methods, however, often backfire. Assertive puppies often take a confrontation as a challenge and escalate their defiance. They may, for example, strongly resist attempts to use submission training postures. In these puppies, lure-reward methods of training can be beneficial?

Owners should avoid getting into a fighting match with these puppies. Withdrawing attention, leaving a room, and using loud noise distracters (e.g. airhorns) can help control exuberant play. Vigorous exercise (20 minutes twice a day) can help channel energy into an appropriate activity. Owners should encourage games such as fetch and discourage games such as tug of war. They shouldn't encourage inappropriate play, such as wrestling, with these puppies.

Leashing the puppy helps eliminate unwanted behaviors. A Gentle Leader/Promise head collar with a 70-ft lead will provide additional control while the owner is home and awake. Handfeeding is often useful in assertive puppies that guard their food. Or the owner can make the puppy sit and wait for its food and then place the bowl down with a small amount food. Once the puppy has eaten that, the owner can pick up the bowl and repeat.

Assertive behavior can quickly get out of hand in large-breed puppies. Early behavioral intervention with qualified behaviorists may be needed to give the owner control and avoid aggression and injury.

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First impressions are everything

Remember when your mother told you to make a good first impression? Have you ever thought about making a good first impression on the new puppy in your exam room?

A young puppy is easily intimidated, especially on its first office visit. When frightened, it may respond with growling, snapping, and, in some situations, with urination and defecation. Each frightening experience may create fears that become more profound with each visit.

Veterinarians and staff should strive to make a puppy's first visit as stress-free as possible. To accomplish this, be aware of nonthreatening and friendly ways to interact with new puppies. First of all, allow the puppy to come to you. Encourage approach by using a soft tone of voice, beckoning with your hand, and even offering a delectable food treat. Once the puppy comes to you, gently touch it. Avoid reaching out and grabbing a puppy because you might startle it. If a puppy seems to resist efforts to restrain and examine it, offer another food treat. Try smearing some baby food on the exam table. While the puppy licks it off, it may stand quietly for a heart and lung examination. When examining the head, face, and ears, give food treats. During each step of the examination, use food treats, a gentle voice, and praise to let the puppy know that it is behaving correctly and need not fear the exam or you.

What should you do when faced with a growling or biting puppy? Veterinarians often think that such a puppy is being dominant, so they try to control it. Most often, however, the behavior is motivated by fear, not a desire to be dominant. When fear is the motivation, yelling at the puppy or snuffing its neck will increase the dog's fear. If the event is traumatic enough, it can

leave a lasting negative impression on the puppy. If a puppy is truly intractable, try offering food or smearing baby food on the table. If the puppy won't eat, try shifting locations, perhaps to the floor. If attempts at calming the puppy are unsuccessful, consider stopping the examination and suggesting the owner return on another day when the puppy is calmer. Your goal is to make veterinary visits fun and non-threatening. By showing your concern for both the medical and behavioral welfare of their new pet, you will impress your client. When the client returns and brings the puppy into the waiting room, provide some play time and food treats. Use the time you spend playing with the puppy to discuss health and behavioral issues with the owner. By taking these steps, you help the puppy and its owner build a lifelong association of pleasant experiences with your veterinary clinic.

Naturally if a puppy is ill, medical needs take precedence, and you must proceed with the examination. Use good judgment about when it is best to proceed and when it is best to wait. Remember, you never get a second chance to make a first impression!