



FEATURE

Early socialisation is important *...and should be fun!*

Words: Barbara Hodel - President of the Pet Professional Guild Australia

Socialisation is one of the 'buzz' words in dog training and everyone defines it differently. Socialisation, at a basic level, is respondent (classical) conditioning, which means creating an association between two stimuli and in the case of puppy socialisation, hopefully a positive one.

The most important window of opportunity is between about 4 weeks to 16 weeks and, as dogs spend a lot of that time with the breeder, it becomes clear that breeders have a big task at hand. On the positive side, it also means that during this time we get the most 'bang for our buck,' to put it casually. For example, one or two positive associations with a child will make a lasting, positive impression on the puppy. A properly socialised puppy is more likely to perceive the world as a safe and fun place. An under socialised puppy could be fearful of new things and might end up being cautious or even anxious.

Fifty years ago, not too many breeders, trainers or owners talked about socialisation. Not because puppies did not need it, but because, for the most part, puppies 'self-socialised'. They were less regulated and restricted than today. They wandered and roamed the neighbourhood, accompanied children to school, hung out with other dogs (sometimes got into a bingle with one of them), and occasionally a child was bitten, or a dog hurt by a car. Even twenty years ago, back in Switzerland, our dog would go to work with my husband, roam the streets, spend time with strangers, steal sandwiches and come back when it was time to go home. He got picked up by well meaning people occasionally and once by police. It was no big problem, no fines either and it was a different time.

I am not saying we should go back to the 'old times', but with dogs not allowed anywhere without their owners, socialisation has become very important. It also has become more difficult and time consuming. Expectations by owners are extremely high and we just expect dogs to fit in with our busy lifestyle and suburban housing density. We tend to forget that dogs are not made to spend extended periods of time on their own, or the best part of the day in a backyard.

Early stimulation and socialisation is beneficial for the development of our puppies. Proper socialisation is the most important task when raising a well adjusted dog, who is able to cope with our modern world. You can teach an old dog a new trick, but if the short window of socialisation has closed, we are always playing catch up.



Breeders important role

Breeders play an important role and more and more breeders are really on the case. The most comprehensive resource is probably 'Puppy Culture' (www.puppyculture.com) and while we do not have to follow the protocols completely, it is a great resource. As most puppies will live in a family home, it therefore makes sense that puppies are born in a home and exposed early to the normal noises, along with the comings and goings of busy households. Early handling is a must and puppies need to be handled gently and on a daily basis. They need to be socialised to a wide range of stimuli, the most important being people and more people. Before they leave for their forever home they should meet toddlers, children, teenagers, adults, older people and people in different outfits, such as tradespeople, coats, umbrellas etc.



‘Socialisation has to happen at the puppy’s pace and the puppy has to be able to make a choice.’

Socialisation

Meeting the same people over and over again, like the immediate family, is not socialisation but habituation. Puppies need to meet other friendly animals, experience different surfaces and get used to different noises. There are a lot of apps and noise cds available, which can help.

They also need a stimulating environment with environmental enrichment, such as toys, food dispensing toys, tunnels, objects to step and balance on, etc. Puppies need to be able to freely explore and investigate in their own time and pace, interact and manipulate. This contributes to puppies being more inquisitive, better able to cope with stress and able to solve problems.

positive exposure there is another way to create a fearful puppy: ***Inappropriate exposure.*** If we are not careful we might create negative association and sensitise puppies and make them scared.

Imagine this scenario. A well meaning mum takes her brand new puppy to see her daughter play soccer, pops the leash on and goes to the park. Her daughter’s entire team runs up to the puppy and tries to pat it. The puppy might feel trapped, but the leash prevents her to back off and she might get really scared by this overwhelming experience. The puppy now has a bad association with the lead, open space, girls of a certain age, screaming children and more. And that is not even considering the vaccination status, that the puppy should not be at the park.

Socialisation has to happen at the puppy’s pace and the puppy has to be able to make a choice. If a puppy decides not to approach a certain stimulus, then we need to accept that. There is nothing wrong with encouraging, but under no circumstances should the puppy be forced into it. Create a positive association with fun play, interaction, tasty treats, cuddles and pats.

Puppy pre-schools

Puppy pre-schools are a great opportunity to socialise a puppy to a wide range of people and environments. It is also the place to set owners up for proper training and help with trouble shooting.

A puppy class can only provide a certain amount of socialisation, maybe 5%, the rest is homework.



Breeders should also start early training, such as house training, being away from the litter mates (maybe towards the 8 week mark), even sleep away from the other pups, along with the basic cues, such as sit and come. While puppies need to learn to self sooth, we should not just let them cry, but reassure them if they get stressed.

Responsible owners

Responsible owners will keep socialising once they have brought their new puppy home. However, in addition to lack of

However, one important aspect of a well run puppy school should be socialisation with other puppies. Most dog owners with the appropriate information can socialise to people, surfaces, noises and environments, but few people have access to other puppies of a similar age. Even if a puppy will never go to an off leash area, they will meet dogs in social settings and need to be able to interact appropriately. A well run puppy pre-school is often the only place where a puppy can safely meet other puppies and practice appropriate body language.



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Most puppies love to play.

Puppies need to learn to interact and meet other puppies of different sizes, temperaments and looks. They also need to be able to calm down in the presence of other puppies and ignore them.

Like any other part of socialisation there is only a limited window of time and you cannot and should not take your puppy to the dog park. There are many reasons for not taking your puppy to the off leash area too early: the puppy is not fully vaccinated, the dog park is unpredictable and potentially dangerous for a puppy or a small dog. A lot of adult dogs do not like puppies in their face and one bad experience can cause a lot of damage!

A puppy pre-school with carefully moderated off leash interaction is the best place to socialise with other dogs. The trainers need to be qualified (at least a Cert IV in Companion Animal Services) and be a member of a professional association, such as the Pet Professional Guild Australia or the Delta Institute.

To raise a well adjusted dog, you need to super socialise your puppy, so there is nothing wrong with doing more than one puppy class.

Despite the window of opportunity closing, we have to keep it up so the 'socialisation muscle' stays strong, fit and healthy with puppies over the age of 16 weeks!

Older dogs

We will need to expose our teenage dog on an ongoing basis and in a positive way to new experiences and even mature dogs benefit from social outings.

I recommend taking a young dog, up to about a year, to new and different places a couple of times a week. Once they are over a year, occasionally take them to a new place or for a new experience, just to make sure! Don't forget socialisation is not just exposure, but associating the experiences in a positive way.



About the author

Barbara Hodel is the President of the Pet Professional Guild Australia (<https://www.ppgaaustralia.net.au>) and a qualified and accredited professional dog trainer.

The PPGA is a chapter of the Pet Professional Guild, a science based, force free, professional body for the pet care industry, including veterinary behaviourists, dog, cat, horse and bird trainers, dog groomers and walkers, as well as day care centres. The PPGA offers free membership for pet dog owners. In 2018 the first Australian Educational Summit will be held in Sydney.

Barbara is also a registered breeder with Dogs NSW under the KEERG prefix, breeding German Shorthaired Pointers.

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