

Kindergarten pup

While a dog's personality can vary depending on the breed, early socialisation plays an important role in its development. Puppy preschool is the ideal place to start.

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If you protect your puppy too much from the outside world, it won't learn the basic skills it needs to cope with life.

Socialisation is the process where a dog learns to relate to people of all ages, other dogs and other animals. It is during this development where a puppy begins to understand its individual and wider environment.

The nature verses nurture debate relates to animals just as much as humans and it's important to remember that the process by which a puppy develops and learns will greatly shape the way it acts its whole life. Dogs that fail to receive sufficient exposure to other dogs, people of varying ages, other animals and new environments during the optimal socialisation period may develop irreversible fears. These fears can subsequently lead to timidity or aggression when the dog is faced with unfamiliar circumstances.

Socialisation most easily occurs before the puppy is three months old and starts in the home, as you develop your relationship as owner and pet. However, from three months onwards your puppy should be ready to leave the house and meet other dogs, and puppy preschool is the perfect place to begin.

Life lessons

Lucille Ellem has been a professional trainer for 45 years and is an Obedience judge. She runs a Kindergarten Puppy Education course and says that socialisation teaches a pup the skills its needs to cope as it grows.

"If a puppy is sheltered and protected and not shown what's in the future, it doesn't learn the skills it needs to cope with loud noises and things in the everyday world like wheelie bins, traffic, people and dogs," says Lucille. "They'll never be sure of themselves and will not gain what they need to become a well adjusted dog."

Lucille, who specialises in teaching people to have a relationship with their dog, strongly believes that a puppy's socialisation process is as much about the owner as it is about the dog. "If an owner doesn't have a relationship with their dog, the dog won't understand where it stands and where it is placed in the family unit; it gets confused."

A puppy generally learns what is right and wrong from its litter, but when a puppy is adopted, it becomes the owner's responsibility to teach these lessons. Taught incorrectly, the puppy will not be socialised properly. "Socialisation does not mean that puppies need to be forced into social situations. As long as it is surrounded by everything it will learn by hearing, smelling and seeing," says Lucille.

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Biting etiquette

One of the most important lessons that a puppy will learn at puppy school is bite inhibition, which refers to a dog's ability to control the force of its biting. Bite etiquette is usually learnt from its mother and siblings, however, when a puppy is brought home its new family becomes its litter and its natural learning process ends abruptly.

For most young puppies, biting is a natural and essential part of growing up. However, puppies need to be trained to regulate and minimise biting. Puppy school and the socialisation process is where a puppy learns to control its bite. During play, a puppy's playmate will react according to the force of a bite. If a puppy bites too hard, its playmate will generally yelp loudly and back away, signalling that playtime is over. This can only be done through trial and error. A puppy will learn the strength of its bite and how hard is too hard. This will then be reflected in its playtime with other dogs and in its attitude towards humans.



Dr Kersti Seksel from Sydney Animal Behaviour Services says the kinder you are to your dog, the better its behaviour will be.

"It is important to remember that socialisation does not end with graduation from puppy school, but continues well into adult development."



Try not to fall for those puppy-dog eyes when teaching basic Obedience skills.

Terrible teens

It is important to remember that socialisation does not end with graduation from puppy school, but continues well into adult development with a dog's personality changing as it grows.

Much like a teenager, a dog can experience sudden personality changes during adolescence, which can happen at any time between six months and two years, depending on the breed and size.

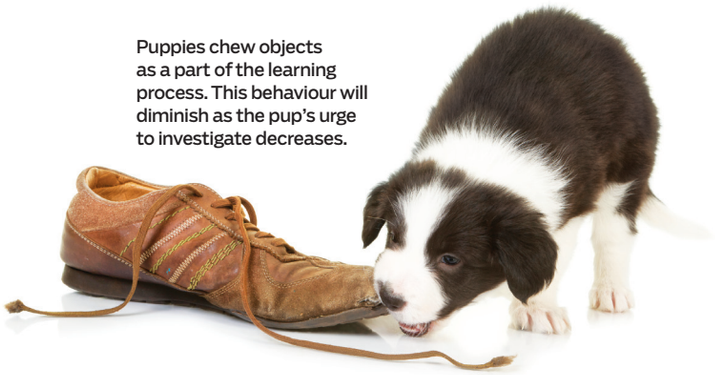
A dog's adolescence is that awkward stage between puppyhood and adulthood, and hormones significantly impact a dog's personality. If you adopted your dog as a puppy and organised suitable training, you have an advantage.

"Dogs aren't robots, they have a right to challenge you. They have a right to suss you out and if you get caught in the trap, then the dog will walk all over you," Lucille says. "However, if the foundation is there in the beginning, the owner can go back to the dog's initial training to remind it who is the leader."

An easy way to deal with adolescence is to go back to basics. Emphasise everything a puppy learnt during puppyhood. An adolescent dog often reverts back to puppy behaviour, so it's usually a matter of going back and revisiting the things you did at home with your puppy during training.

Keep it active, take it to parks to socialise with other dogs, pay attention and spend time with the puppy. This not only assures the puppy that it has your attention, but it also asserts your dominance, reinforcing your superiority. →

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Puppies chew objects as a part of the learning process. This behaviour will diminish as the pup's urge to investigate decreases.

Behavioural problems

When it comes to managing a puppy's socialisation process, it's important to recognise whether the puppy is exhibiting problem behaviour or behavioural problems and deal with the issue accordingly. Dr Kersti Seksel from Sydney Animal Behaviour Services deals with behaviour problems in animals.

"There is a big difference between a behavioural problem – which is what I call mental health issues – and problem behaviours, which is where training really comes in," says Kersti.

Socialisation is a process that may help with the management of a genetic predisposition disorder. While a mental health issue in a dog cannot be cured, it can be managed, and with the right approach a puppy can lead a healthy, normal life.

Anxiety is a disorder that can significantly affect the way your puppy grows up and, without the right training and care, can lead to many behavioural problems including aggression. Kersti helps dogs to deal with anxiety through the 3M Program – behavioural modification, environmental management and medication.

"What we do know is that any harsh methods, even yelling at the dog, can increase the chances of aggression by 25 per cent," Kersti explains. "If your dog is anxious, the kinder and nicer you are, the better that dog is going to behave."

While socialisation can't cure a mental health issue in your puppy, avoiding the process can do much more harm than good.

Dogs are inherently social so it's important to continue socialising your dog outside of any formal training. Take it to public parks or dog-friendly beaches, let your dog play with other dogs and become familiar with different environments. Give your dog the chance to understand that meeting new people and new dogs is a positive, playful experience.

If a dog learns that strangers and other dogs should be met with trust as a puppy, then it will carry this lesson into the future, meeting new encounters with the same positive, playful attitude. •••



A day in the life of a puppy preschool trainer

Mali Rolph – See Spot Run, Sydney

Qualifications

Mali has a Certificate III in Dog Training and Behaviour from the National Dog Trainer's Federation of Australia. She is also one of two Australians with international recognition as a Certified Pet Dog Trainer – Knowledge Assessed. Mali is a graduate of Vicki Austin's Puppy Instructors Course.

What's involved?

Mali sees clients on a one-on-one basis before puppy school. "Everyone is different; you have some people who are home all day and some who work, and there's different techniques and methods. It's important during the private consultation that the person sitting in front of me gets the information they need for their particular situation."

After the initial private consultation, the puppy attends a four-week, on-leash puppy course where it learns basic obedience, focus on the handler and how to socialise with other puppies.

Puppy training program

The puppy training classes are conducted on-leash to ensure that puppies are comfortable within the group environment and to minimise the playtime that may occur when off-leash. "Proper socialisation between dogs takes about 20 seconds, anything more than that sometimes fits into that area of playtime."

Week one: sit, stay, conditioned reinforcement and release command.
Week two: recall and preventing food-guarding aggression.
Week three: lie down and leave it.
Week four: walking on a loose leash and mock vet examination.

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