

# Puppy Education – The Importance of Socialisation

Carla O'Donnell PhD, CPDT



Getting a puppy is an exciting time and all owners hope that their puppy will grow into a happy, well behaved and friendly adult dog. Without a doubt, appropriate puppy education is the single most important factor to ensure this is what happens. Socialisation is one of the most important roles of a new puppy owner

and it is a unique window of time that will have an impact on the puppy for life. The early stages in a dog's life are critical for his development into a happy, safe, and loving pet. Fears and aversions developed during puppyhood can be altered, but never completely obliterated, in adulthood.

Socialisation is the process of becoming familiar with all kinds of animals, people, places, and things; as well as learning how to behave in society. To be beneficial, these experiences need to be enjoyable and fun. All puppies need socialisation regardless of breed or temperament. This should not be taken for granted, even breeds that have a very good reputation for loving people such as the Golden Retriever, need to be thoroughly socialised as puppies. Puppies that are well socialised are more confident adults, that reach their full potential.

The nature of socialisation and training changes as puppies develop. The following chart provides general guidelines for the stages of development. Depending on breed and individual dog, stages may be longer or shorter and may take place earlier or later.

STAGE AND AGE	WHAT TO EXPECT	WHAT TO DO
<b>Neonatal Period</b> <b>Birth-13 days</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Unable to eliminate or regulate body temperature without mother.</li><li>• Eyes closed and unable to hear.</li><li>• Crawl forward and vocalize to seek mother.</li><li>• EEG when awake identical to when</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• At this age, puppies benefit from gentle daily handling by humans. Respect the dam's protective maternal instinct.</li></ul> Remember to wash hands before handling.

	sleeping.	
<b>Transitional Period</b> <b>13-20 days</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Begin to react to sound.</li> <li>• Teeth erupt.</li> <li>• Eyes open, react to changes in light, but unable to see fully.</li> <li>• Crawl backwards as well as forwards, begins to stand, as well as wag tail.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Now is a good time to begin to expose puppies to safe, novel objects.</li> <li>• Continue handling and talking to the puppies</li> </ul>
<b>Awareness</b> <b>Period 21-28 days</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are able to use all their senses fully.</li> <li>• Can walk.</li> <li>• Can thermoregulate and eliminate.</li> <li>• Are learning at an extremely fast rate.</li> <li>• Begin to play with littermates.</li> <li>• Can eat by means other than sucking.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Because this time is full of sensory development, the environment should remain relatively stable so as not to overload the pups.</li> <li>• Pups can be introduced to carpet, wood, tile, linoleum, etc., for short intervals.</li> </ul>
<b>Canine Socialization</b> <b>Period 21-49 days</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learn species specific behaviour from dam and littermates such as facial expressions, body postures mouthing, chasing, barking, soliciting play, and status-seeking behaviours.</li> <li>• Begin showing appeasement gestures to dam when disciplined.</li> <li>• Learn bite inhibition from playing with littermates.</li> <li>• Begin to understand social hierarchy through interaction with dam and littermates.</li> <li>• Mother begins weaning pups.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Begin short <i>positive reinforcement</i> training sessions.</li> <li>• Allow plenty of time for pups and mother to be together.</li> <li>• Introduce to crate: keep an open crate in the whelping box to facilitate in crate-training later on.</li> <li>• Provide aural stimuli through radio; continue handling and speaking to pups.</li> <li>• Introduce pups to short car rides.</li> </ul>
<b>Human Socialization</b> <b>Period 7-12 weeks</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can form deep bonds with humans at this time.</li> <li>• Go through a fearful stage between 8 and 11 weeks of age. Anything that traumatizes them at this stage could potentially scare them for the rest of their lives.</li> <li>• Have the brain waves of adult dogs.</li> <li>• Can go home with a human family.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Despite their fear period, they should be exposed to many new objects, situations, people and dogs carefully and with plenty of positive reinforcement. According to Dr. Ian Dunbar, a puppy should have met 100 people by 12 weeks of age.</li> <li>• Ensure that puppy builds positive associations with, for example, men, children, vet visits, thunder, car horns, etc.</li> </ul>
<b>Seniority</b> <b>Classification</b> <b>Period</b> <b>10-16 weeks</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attempt to resolve questions regarding their status in the household</li> <li>• Become more independent</li> <li>• Pushy puppies will begin to display oppositional mouthing/biting</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue to provide a structured environment for puppies.</li> <li>• Continue to teach your puppy basic cues</li> <li>• Continue to condition pup to accept thorough handling.</li> </ul>

<p><b>Flight Instinct</b> <b>Period</b> <b>4-8 months</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May resist coming when called.</li> <li>• Venture off on own.</li> <li>• Teething and associated chewing and mouthing intensifies.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keep pup on leash to prevent him from wandering off</li> <li>• Redirect chewing onto appropriate items. Keep inappropriate items out of reach.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Second Fear Impact</b> <b>Period: Adolescence</b> <b>6-14 months</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May become fearful of new, and even familiar, situations.</li> <li>• Reach sexual maturity; males being lifting leg and females go into first heat.</li> <li>• Lifelong reactive behaviour patterns (growling at unfamiliar people, for example) can form.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Earlier socialization should help this period pass smoothly.</li> <li>• Do not punish a fearful pup; instead help him overcome his fears through classical conditioning.</li> <li>• Make new experiences fun and rewarding by playing games and offering treats before the pup has a chance to become fearful.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Maturity</b> <b>1-4 years</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue to grow to full size.</li> <li>• Behaviour issues not addressed will become apparent, if not already so. These include: resource guarding, reactivity towards people or other dogs.</li> <li>• Continue to build associations with objects, people, and situations for the rest of life.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue to socialize with as many kinds of people and dogs for the rest of the dog's life.</li> <li>• The dog will, at any age, always need enrichment in the form of human and canine interaction, toys, and exercise</li> </ul>

For descriptive ease, scientists divide development into separate stages. However, dogs do not abruptly leave one stage and enter another, rather the progression is smooth and the stages overlap. In reality, a dog's behaviour and temperament are always in a state of change. For example, adolescence is not a precise point separating puppyhood from adulthood but rather, it is an ongoing period of social as well as sexual maturation, starting as early as 16 weeks and lasting until three years of age in a large breed such as the Golden Retriever.

Socialisation is an ongoing process that must start very early and should begin in the breeder's home. Even before a puppy can hear or see, "puppy enrichment" can begin by focusing on the fully developed senses the puppy does have (those of touch and smell). Before 8 weeks of age at the breeders home neonatal handling, safe socialisation with people, errorless houstraining and chew toy training are vital. As a rule of thumb, before they are eight weeks old, puppies need to meet and be handled by at least a hundred people — especially men and children. Then the very first day your

puppy comes home the clock is ticking. All aspects of puppy training and behaviour modification will only get harder as your puppy gets older, so don't wait, start training as soon as your puppy comes home! Puppies must be safely socialised to people and taught to enjoy being hugged and handled (restrained and examined) before they are three months old. This is the crucial developmental stage during which puppies learn to accept and enjoy the company of other dogs and people. Thus your puppy needs to be socialised to people by the time he is twelve weeks old otherwise, during adolescence they will likely become wary and fearful about strangers especially children and men. These fears can escalate into defensive and aggressive behaviour leading to a generally unhappy and stressed dog. Most bites occur because a dog is fearful and unsure, not because he is "dominant" or "protective"

Puppies have very sharp teeth and even fairly gentle bites can hurt. However, puppy biting behaviour and periodic painful (yet non-harmful) bites are essential for a puppy to ultimately develop a soft mouth as an adult dog. Puppies learn from their litter mates that play-fighting and play-biting are fun, but that painful bites bring an abrupt end to the play session. Thus, the more puppies are allowed to play and bite, the quicker the painful bites decrease in frequency. Puppies must learn to control the pressure of their biting and mouthing when playing with other dogs and when playing with humans before they develop the strength to cause serious harm. Therefore, we must teach puppies proper bite inhibition before they get too old. Bite inhibition must be taught during puppyhood.

As your pup grows older and is able to go out into the world, you must continue socialisation outside the home, puppy classes are great for your pup to learn how to play appropriately with other pups and further develop their bite inhibition, but also you should be actively incorporating positive training into all aspects of your dog's life. By training on your walks, in the car, when making a cup of tea and at the park, etc... you will raise a dog that is confident and relaxed in all situations.

Unfortunately, far too many owners underestimate the crucial importance of teaching bite inhibition and socialising their young puppy. Not teaching bite inhibition is both foolish and potentially dangerous. Not sufficiently socialising a puppy is inhumane; as an adult, the poor dog will forever feel stressed, anxious and edgy around people, which isn't fair.

Is there such a thing as too much socialisation and training? Yes studies have shown that by the time they are eight-weeks old, puppies require three times the amount of downtime (usually sleeping) than they spend exploring, playing and socialising. Sufficient downtime is essential for the puppy's brain to "process" experiences and learning. Needless to say, during socialisation, owners should be patient, handling should be gentle and basic manners taught using food/toy lures and rewards, i.e., no

grabbing, forcibly restraining, pushing, pulling, squishing and squashing. Training session should be fun and frequent but very short — just a minute or two at a time.

Even though early socialisation is critical, in reality, the period of socialisation never ends. When socialisation continues, dogs become even more socialised, whereas when socialisation is discontinued (e.g., when dogs are isolated, or not walked regularly), dogs gradually de-socialise until eventually they may become fearful, asocial, or even antisocial, so next month we will look at another important stage - Adolescence.

