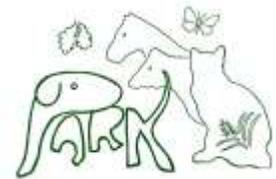


Park Veterinary Centre



SOCIALISATION AND HABITUATION

Socialisation

This term is used to describe how an animal interacts and relates to its own and other species. In other words how it gets on with other dogs, with people and with other animals like cats and rabbits. Relationships are most easily formed between 6 and 8 weeks of age so it is important to get your puppy as early as possible, around 7-8 weeks is a good time.

Habituation

This term is used to describe how an animal learns to accept things in its environment.

In other words it learns that things like vacuum cleaners, T.Vs, washing machines, traffic, thunder and fireworks are normal environmental stimuli and are not harmful to them so they get used to them and ignore them most of the time.

Puppies go through a sensitive period in their behavioural development during which time they are more predisposed to learn about new experiences, such as forming new relationships with other dogs, with people and with other animals and adjusting to new environments. This sensitive period begins around 3 weeks of age and lasts until around 12-14 weeks. During this period you should introduce your puppy to as many new experiences as possible on a gradual basis.

Here is a suggested list.

1.) Introduce him to lots of different people.

Puppies usually want to jump up when they greet people because it is a natural puppy way of saying 'hello'. He is trying to get to your face to lick it. If you don't want him to jump up, there is no need to **punish** him, just ensure that jumping up is never rewarded. Your puppy should only get attention when all four of his feet are on the ground. When he jumps, don't talk to him, don't stroke him and don't look at him. You'll find he stops jumping very quickly and then you can greet him. When your puppy meets new people, they should stroke him, talk to him and give him a food treat so that he learns to welcome the attention. The people your puppy meets should include;

- a.) Men and women of all ages.
- b.) Babies and children.
- c.) People of differing appearances, e.g. wearing hats, wearing glasses (especially dark glasses), different races, short, very tall.
- d.) People not on two legs! e.g. on bicycles, on skateboards, on scooters, in wheelchairs, on crutches.
- e.) People who deliver to your house, e.g. postmen/women, milkmen/women, the paper boy/girl.
- f.) People in uniform, e.g. policemen, traffic wardens.
- g.) People's behaviour. Dogs need to learn that people do things they may find strange! E.g. jogging/running, skipping, dancing, waving arms around, sitting or lying on the floor, dressing up (children in masks etc), playing instruments - the list is endless!
- h.) Get your puppy used to eye contact gradually. Most people look straight at puppies and this sometimes worries them so teach them that eye contact is not necessarily frightening. Do not menace your puppy with prolonged eye contact. Build up from short glances.

2.) Introduce your puppy to other puppies and adult dogs.

Your puppy needs to learn how to communicate effectively with his own kind. He needs to know how to interpret other dogs' signals and how to respond to them. AVOID aggressive or badly behaved dogs. You don't want him to be frightened and you don't want him to learn bad behaviour.

- a.) Great start with puppy group!
- b.) Go to puppy training classes.

c.) Go to the park and allow him to meet and have supervised play sessions with other friendly dogs.

Check with other owners first that their dog is safe.

d.) Invite other dogs round to play with him but introduce them in the garden or on neutral territory.

3.) Introduce your puppy to other animals.

If you have other animals or intend to take your pup to houses where other animals live, then this is important. Introduce him initially on a lead and do not allow him to chase. Reward him for quiet interaction. Give him treats when he investigates gently.

Other animals may be: cats, rabbits, small rodents like mice, gerbils, hamsters, birds, horses, cattle and sheep (make sure that he is on a lead!)

4.) Gradually expose your puppy to normal environmental stimuli.

This includes:

Washing machines, vacuum cleaners, hair dryers, televisions, radios and stereo systems, lawnmowers, food processors, thunderstorms, fireworks, traffic, shopping areas with lots of people, play areas with lots of children, cars, trains, buses, ferries (if you intend to use them), quiet places, large areas of water like rivers or lakes, bridges over water or over motorways, escalators and lifts (if you intend to use them) & staircases.

Some or all of these things will be new to your puppy if the breeder has not introduced him to them. Until he is fully vaccinated stick to things you can do at home or carry him. He can still experience new people, new sights and new sounds that are outdoors if he can be carried.

The watch word is GRADUAL. You cannot flood him with all these things in one week. Take it one at a time. Introduce him to noises at low levels and increase slowly.

WHAT IF YOUR PUPPY IS AFRAID OF SOMETHING NEW

When your puppy meets something new for the first time, let's say a person on a bicycle, his normal reaction will be one of apprehension or fear. It is normal because if puppies in the wild were not cautious of new things they would not live very long. How you react to your puppy's response to these new experiences will determine how he copes. He will probably be taking note of how the rest of the pack (you and your family) are reacting to it. If you panic and pick the puppy up, telling him not to be afraid, then he probably WILL BE afraid. He does not understand "it's all right, there's nothing to be frightened of". He simply notices that attention is on him which reinforces his sense of anxiety.

There are 4 basic rules:

- 1.) Do not over-react. Behave normally and your pup will pick up your confidence.
- 2.) Do not reassure. Talking in a soothing voice, stroking him and making eye contact with him will encourage him to be fearful. Try to behave in a matter of fact way. If you must speak to him do it in a jolly tone.
- 3.) Do not force the situation. Forcing or encouraging your puppy to approach something or someone he is afraid of will only make him more fearful. He needs time to assess and to take account of your reaction. Allow him to approach when he feels able to cope and encourage him when he makes the first move.
- 4.) Reward all confident approaches.

If your puppy is particularly afraid of something, introduce it more often (daily if you can), but only for very short periods. This can be anything from 10 seconds to 1 minute but the important thing is that your puppy is not over anxious. Build up exposure gradually.

Socialisation and habituation should not only be done up to 14 weeks of age. IT IS ONGOING. It is particularly important to continue until the puppy is 6 months old. After 14 weeks your puppy may be more fearful or just more cautious of new things so you will need to be more patient. Most importantly remember, all of your puppy's encounters with people and other dogs should be pleasurable and rewarding. This is what will help him to become a well adjusted, confident adult dog. Have fun!