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Polite and protected puppies: how to run puppy classes that maintain a safe environment and help to establish good behaviour

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ABSTRACT: The main aim of the puppy class is to promote the welfare of the puppy. In addition to offering positive social experiences and owner education regarding care issues, classes can be used to help puppies develop self-control and an awareness of appropriate behaviour. To be safe and successful, the puppy class must be well-structured and carefully managed.

Introduction

Many veterinary practices hold nurse-led puppy classes: they provide a great opportunity to help owners with puppy socialisation and advice regarding care, as well as developing a relationship between clients, pets and practice staff, which promotes the future well-being of the animal. These goals can only be achieved where classes are organised and managed to safeguard the welfare of the puppies while promoting positive experiences. Ensuring that the class is structured enables owners to see progression in their puppies from class to class, and prevents a potentially damaging situation from developing, in which puppies allowed to "run amok" can intimidate younger, smaller and more reticent animals.

Puppy training tends to be thought of as the province of obedience classes for older puppies; however, introducing basic skills to promote self-control and good manners can help to counteract potential behavioural problems at an early stage, fostering the development of a canine companion who is a pleasure to live with, rather than a source of angst, thus making a huge contribution to the establishment of a happy relationship between dog and owner.

Organising the classes

It is a good idea for the nurse who is running the class to have a chat with owners who wish to attend, prior to booking them onto a course. Important information regarding the age, size and background of the puppy can be obtained, and it also provides an opportunity to introduce themselves as well as the practice if the owner is a new client. They can also discuss the format of the class, socialisation activities which can be carried out prior to class attendance (see the section "socialisation window" below) and any current problems or concerns that the client may have. This approach has an additional advantage in that it makes attendance at the first class less daunting for the owner.

Age range

Deciding on the age range of puppies invited to attend classes involves striking a balance between considerations

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of sufficient levels of immunity and the limits of the sensitive socialisation period.

Immunisation

Many UK authorised vaccines specify a primary course of vaccination ending at a minimum of 10 weeks of age (the Summary of Product Characteristics of each veterinary vaccine is publicly available on the VMD website). The World Small Animal Veterinary Association guidelines, cited by Day, Horzinek, Schultz and Squires (2016) state that, because of the presence of maternally derived antibodies, the immune response to vaccination before 12 weeks of age is likely to be weak. It is therefore recommended that animals receiving a primary course of vaccination, which is completed by 10 weeks of age, should be protected by stringent infection control at puppy socialisation classes. The area where the puppy class is to be held should be free from high levels of traffic by dogs with unknown vaccination and disease status, and diligent disinfection prior to the class is essential.

Socialisation window

Studies carried out by Freedman, King and Elliot (1961), in which puppies were initially isolated with their mothers and then began a programme of socialisation at varying ages, determined that after 5 weeks of age the animals began to exhibit an increasing tendency to withdraw from novel stimulus. The researchers also found that this fear response was so intense in puppies not socialised prior to 14 weeks of age that it significantly affected future behaviour.

Considering these findings in conjunction with the immunisation considerations discussed above, it is evident that a compromise must be reached in deciding upon the optimal age range for puppy classes. A lower limit of 10 weeks and an upper limit of 14 weeks enables puppies to obtain maximum benefit during the sensitive socialisation period while maximising protection from infectious disease. However, owners can be encouraged to begin the socialisation process prior to attending puppy classes by taking their pets out to experience new environments, with the advice that puppies should not be placed on the ground in areas frequented by other dogs, and that help is available from the practice should the puppy not cope well with any new situations.

Number of puppies

Limiting the number of puppies per class ensures that adequate control can be maintained by the nursing staff and also allows the provision of appropriate levels of individual attention. Staff should decide in advance what they feel comfortable with: in my experience a maximum of six puppies and a minimum of four per nurse provide the ideal environment to achieve socialisation goals while ensuring decorum! It is also a good idea to limit the number of people attending with each puppy to two; of course, we do not want to discourage any family members from being involved, so suggest that families alternate the individuals attending.

Explaining the aims and training process to owners

This approach to puppy training aims to produce an animal which has learned to be well-behaved, rather than just obedient. When a puppy understands what is expected of it in a given situation, life becomes easier for both the pet and the owner. Of course, we still want the puppy to respond positively to commands when required, but the need for constant direction is removed, which is less wearing for both parties!

Puppies only learn the "house rules" when they are applied consistently. This is an area on which it is sometimes difficult for different members of a household to agree. It may be that the children love cuddling the puppy on the sofa but the grown-ups don't relish cleaning muddy pawprints from the upholstery on a regular basis! This is not to say that puppies must be excluded from furniture, but rather to point out that it is not fair to expect the puppy to know that different rules apply at different times: he or she can only learn what is expected if the rules are clear and consistent. Encouraging families to decide on and stick to their own set of rules for the puppy can have a profound, positive effect on the happiness of all of the members of the household.

Getting owners to look at training from the puppy's point of view can be very helpful. At a training event which I attended some years ago, the human participants were asked to take on the role of either puppy or trainer. The canine substitutes were asked to leave the room, while those designated as trainers were asked to choose a skill which they wished to teach their "puppy", such as sitting on command or raising a paw. The "puppies" were then invited back into the room, having first been asked to "forget" everything they knew about traditional commands. The difficulty which became apparent to both sets of participants in communicating and understanding what was required was a revelation: success was only achieved when the trainers patiently and unequivocally guided the "puppies" to perform the desired behaviour and rewarded it promptly, maintaining a consistent approach. Something similar may be useful to introduce at the initial puppy class: it does not need to be a prolonged role-play, which some people may not relish, but developing the idea does encourage owners to think about the training process.

Similarly, it is useful for nurses to think about the owners' experience of puppy classes, to ensure that the environment is relaxed and unpressured. In my experience it is not helpful to invite owners to "perform" with their puppies in front of the other members of the class: individuals can feel tense in such circumstances and transmit this to their animals, merely ensuring that neither gives of their best! I have found that it is better to invite owners to work with their puppies while the nurse (or nurses) mingle and are available to assist and guide.

First steps in developing good manners

There are a number of basic skills which can be introduced in puppy classes which will help to produce a polite puppy and strengthen the bond with its owner. Simple and readily attainable goals will give both puppies and owners confidence.

Developing the ability to be calm

Self-control for a puppy starts with the ability to be calm. This is not a state which we may usually associate with puppy parties! Young puppies are easily aroused and distracted, and we cannot expect them to maintain a Zen-like state in exciting surroundings for very long. However, periodically interrupting games with a word such as "enough" and distracting the puppy with some treats can teach him or her that life does not always have to be conducted at a hundred miles an hour. The treats can be phased out in time and replaced with quiet attention from the owner.

Sit to say please

Teaching a puppy that the best way to obtain something that he or she wants is through polite behaviour can prevent many potentially awkward situations, such

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as jumping up to greet people or rushing up to strange dogs, which may result in an aggressive response. Establishing the rules early on in the puppy's life and remaining consistent are the foundations of success.

"Sit" is often the easiest action to teach a puppy when it wants something (**Figure 1**). The sit position is initially asked for prior to giving such rewards as meals and putting on the lead before walking. Once a link has been established between "sit" and reward, wait for the action to be offered without directly requesting it; so, for example, pick up the food bowl and wait for the puppy to sit, then immediately place the bowl on the ground. It is amazing how quickly puppies catch on to this. Reward should always quickly follow the "sit" to reinforce the behaviour.

Preventing play biting

In my experience, this is understandably an area of concern which many owners raise at puppy classes. Like human babies, puppies use their mouths to explore their environment. During play with litter-mates, puppies learn to control their bite when their playmate squeals if bitten too hard. Owners can mimic this by sharply saying "ouch" when bitten and walking away if the behaviour continues.

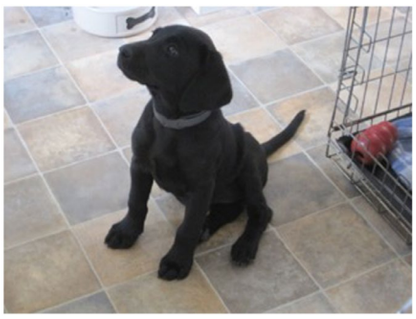

Figure 1. Sit to say please: a puppy waiting for her breakfast

Figure 2. A puppy relaxing in her crate

An "off" command can also be taught to further inhibit biting or mouthing behaviour. A food treat is held in a closed hand in front of the puppy's nose. The other hand also holds treats. When the puppy begins to sniff or lick the offered hand, give the command, keeping the hand closed to ensure that the puppy cannot access the treat. After a few repetitions the puppy will realise that this behaviour is not resulting in him being given the treat and he will turn his face away or step back. At this point a treat can be given from the other hand as a reward for the correct behaviour. Once established, this verbal signal can be used when the puppy is mouthing or play-biting.

It is, however, important to stress to owners that puppies do have a need to bite and chew, and that appropriate toys should be provided as an outlet for this behaviour.

Advising owners on toilet training

This is another area which can cause owners considerable stress. Puppies develop bladder control progressively, meaning that toilet training is an ongoing process for around the first six months of the puppy's life. Accidents and mishaps are to be expected. Nurses can help by advising owners on a suitable routine for the puppy and providing support and encouragement during the inevitable setbacks.

Because ultimately we want our puppy to relieve itself only when outdoors, it seems counter-productive to use puppy training pads or newspaper for toileting indoors. Dogs trained in this manner often gravitate towards any handy paper when they feel the urge, and who can blame them when they have been brought up to do so?!

Crates are very useful during toilet training, as puppies will avoid soiling their own "den" (**Figure 2**). However, some owners are reluctant to confine their pets in this way, even when the many benefits of their correct use are discussed (for example, preventing puppies from gaining access to potentially injurious articles and establishing a secure refuge to which the animal is happy to go), and this is of course their prerogative. In such a situation, the puppy will need to be closely supervised at all times to minimise the incidence of accidents and ensure that toilet training progresses.

Whatever the choice of environment, puppies should initially be taken outside and given the chance to relieve themselves every half hour during the day. Puppies are also more likely to toilet after playing, eating and sleeping. During the night, a trip outside in the small hours should help a young puppy to stay clean. These intervals can be gradually extended and the nocturnal trip dispensed with once the individual puppy can cope with it; thankfully, the night-time excursion is usually required for a short time only.

As mentioned previously, accidents will happen: nurses can reassure owners that occasional deviations do not mean that the training is not working or that they have failed to implement it correctly. If the puppy is obviously preparing to go or is still in the act of toileting when discovered, he or she should be carried outside to complete the bodily function. The puppy should not be punished: in order for the retribution to be associated with the act it must occur at exactly the same time, and even if this is achieved the most likely outcome is that the puppy will be afraid to toilet in the owner's presence.

Helping with recall and introducing walking on a loose lead

Young puppies have an in-built instinct to follow their mothers, which helps to protect them from danger. We can use this survival response to help establish a strong recall, get puppies used to walking at heel and give a firm foundation for loose lead walking. These areas are often a source of frustration for owners, and getting puppies used to these skills at an early age is invaluable.

More confident puppies may be tempted to explore the environment away from the owner, and in these cases treats and extra activity by the owners such as clapping hands or running away can help to maintain the puppy's attention.

The success of the method depends initially upon removing distractions, so when puppies are practising recall and following their owners in class, limit the activity to one puppy and owner at a time; meanwhile, the other owners in the group can practise encouraging calmness, as discussed earlier.

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This exercise can then be developed by introducing the lead. Again, work with one owner and puppy at a time. The lead is attached to the collar or harness and the puppy is rewarded with a food treat. It is most important that the lead is held loosely and that there is no pressure on the lead or harness. The owner takes a step forward and hopefully the puppy will follow – if not, a treat can be used to encourage the puppy. The food reward is given when the puppy moves forward at the owner's side; if there is any pulling by the puppy in any direction, the owner should stand still and encourage the puppy back to his or her side, at which point the puppy is rewarded. The number of steps is built up gradually. Encouraging owners to practice this at home for short periods at a time gets the partnership off to a good start with lead walking and should help owners to avoid the experience of the dog walking them!

Conclusion

A good puppy class helps the pet and owner to lay the foundations of a happy and secure future together. The provision of a well-structured, carefully managed and supervised environment is vital to the achievement of these goals.

Introducing a training element can combat any tendencies towards undesirable behaviours which may prove problematic later on, both for the owner and the wider community. The exercises outlined can be readily incorporated into classes, alongside their vitally important role in providing positive social experiences and education in care. Owners should feel able to be open about any difficulties they are experiencing, and nurses should seek further specialist behavioural help where required.

By helping puppies and owners to develop skills which enhance their lives together, veterinary nurses can make a great contribution to animal welfare and the enjoyment of pets by the public.

References and further reading

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Multiple Choice Questions

1. Regarding Puppy Parties, which is most true:

(a) Allowing puppies to run amok allows them to burn off energy

(b) Structure in a class encourages smaller or shy puppies to be intimidated

(c) Shy puppies should be encouraged to run amok at class

(d) Poorly structured puppy parties can be damaging

2. Puppies require extra consideration regarding immunisation status. What is the lower age limit for puppy parties?

(a) 8 weeks

(b) 10 weeks

(c) 12 weeks

(d) After the vaccine course is complete

3. Teaching what word can help puppies to regulate their level of excitement with time?

(a) Sit

(b) Stay

(c) Stop

(d) Enough

4. The best way to stop play biting is:

(a) Say 'ouch' sharply and walk away if it persists

(b) Say 'NO' firmly

(c) Bite back

(d) Ignore bad behaviour

5. At class you should NOT teach owners that:

(a) Puppies will still have toilet accidents while training

(b) Puppies should never chew

(c) "House rules" will help establish consistency

(d) Regulated behaviour is more important than obedience

6. On teaching puppies to walk on the lead, which is false?

(a) Start slowly with a few steps at a time

(b) Build upon the puppy's natural instinct to follow

(c) Reward the puppy for moving towards you keeping the lead slack

(d) Gently tug the puppy towards you if it veers away

For the answers to the MCQs, please go to: http://www.bvna.org.uk/publications/veterinary-nursing-journal

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