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Roz Pooley has run The Mutt Professor Ltd since 2010. She started off as a dog walker and over time she learned more about behaviour and training and started doing 1-2-1s and consultations in 2012 onwards. After completing extensive CPD she was accepted onto Edinburgh's Master's Degree in Clinical Animal Behaviour in 2017 and graduated in November 2020. Her thesis focused on training and behaviour; professional's perception of behaviour problems in littermates. Roz is a certified member of the IAABC, a full CAB member of the APBC and is beginning her application to become CCAB. She has three adult rescue dogs and has recently adopted a Border Collie puppy called Mohawk. Email: roz@themuttprofessor.co.uk

Socialising a puppy during the pandemic

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ABSTRACT: Socialising a puppy is a challenge at the best of times, but particularly more so during lockdown. Veterinary and behaviour professionals can help owners prevent problem behaviours developing by raising awareness of canine body language, setting up first clinical exams to be positive experiences and providing tips on how owners can adapt social experiences to the individual.

Keywords: puppy; puppies; socialisation; puppy classes

Socialisation is an ongoing process. Providing puppies with positive experiences can prevent aggression and avoidance behaviour (Appleby et al., 2002). However, socialisation has the potential to turn into flooding and become a negative experience. Efforts must be made to tailor experiences to the individual's confidence levels and their response to initial attempts at socialisation. Socialisation should be about quality, not quantity. For benefits to be seen, experiences have to be neutral or preferably-positive.

The "sensitive" socialisation phase is from 5 to 16 weeks of age. This window of opportunity starts to "close" 12 weeks onwards. The onset and speed of "closure" largely depends on the individual. Between 5 and 12 weeks, the fear of novelty increases over time and during this phase we need to carefully expose puppies to as much as possible, so it is no longer perceived as novel or "unsafe" (Dietz et al., 2018). Opportunities are not lost beyond 12 weeks and robust individuals may be relatively unaffected by delayed exposure. However, breeds or individuals of a sensitive disposition may not fare so well. Exposure to the world beyond 12 weeks should therefore be focused on reinforcing and expanding on existing experiences.

It is important to note that puppies experience an increase in heart rate from 7 to 8 weeks of age. This increased activity of the sympathetic nervous system suggests that during this period, pups are likely more sensitive to stimuli (Dietz et al., 2018). This is sometimes referred to as a "fear period." This particular fear period is thought to be the reason why puppies exposed to public environments before 18 weeks of age showed an increased chance of aggressive behaviour in one study (Wormald et al., 2016). However, a

balance must be sought- as a lack of exposure before 18 weeks may also result in neophobia.

Fear is an adaptive emotion, it keeps us safe from harm. Nature primes all individuals to be on the look-out for danger. When puppies are young- their brain is ready to trim down and tidy up all those neural pathways to the ones that matter most. We need to make sure the majority of neural pathways are for associations that elicit a positive emotional response in the puppy. This is easier said than done in a busy urban environment. Additionally, casual, "backyard" breeders and puppy farmers giving little thought to temperament and behaviour traits are contributing to an increasing number of dogs that cannot cope with the world they live in. This is a welfare issue. More dogs under the age of three are euthanised due to behaviour problems than for health problems or accidents (Boyd et al., 2018).

This article details how we, as professionals, can guide puppy owners in making sensible socialisation decisions that may protect dogs from developing undesirable behaviours.

When should owners start socialisation?

Taking into consideration the "fear period" and that puppies are taken home at 8 weeks of age, it may be sensible to encourage owners to give their puppy time (2-7 days, depending on the individual) to adjust to their new home before owners attempt to tick off the never-ending list of social experiences. As I always say to my clients; "socialisation is not a race." Indeed, slow and steady will likely fair best. All the more reason to start the process as soon as possible, rather than wait until when pups are fully vaccinated. However, we



Figure 1. Roz's puppy, Mohawk the Border Collie aged 10 weeks.

must of course assess the risk of disease and socialise puppies safely (Figure 1).

Learning canine body language

For a puppy owner to identify what a negative, neutral or positive emotional response looks like in their puppy they must recognise the broad range of signals dogs use to communicate their emotions and intent. If owners learn to recognise early signs of avoidance and help dogs gain the distance or space they seek in order to feel safe, dogs have little reason to resort to over-reactivity and aggression in such circumstances.

Understanding the breed/type

Owners must recognise that different breeds may show different signals due to their breed's phenotype. A Husky will use many visual signals that a Pug (for example) is physically less capable of. Pugs and other neotenous breeds, may be more difficult for owners to "read," due to their folded ears, curled tail, shortened muzzles and wide eyes. Different breeds may also respond differently to stimuli due to breed-specific traits, such as boldness and shyness (Turcsán et al., 2011). Development rates also differ between breeds. The King Charles Cavalier Spaniel enters the early socialisation phase later than other breeds. While German Shepherds and Yorkshire Terriers enter this phase earlier, making them potentially more sensitive to stimuli.

Breeds that score high in "shyness" or described as "aloof" may need to be exposed

to unfamiliar people or busy environments more carefully than breeds who score highly for "boldness" and are described as social.

However, every dog is an individual. Learning canine body language will help owners respond to the behaviour in front of them.

First clinical exam

During the pandemic, many behaviourists are encountering an increase in dogs who have developed a fear of the vets. Removal from a primary care giver and subsequent examination by an unfamiliar person in an unfamiliar environment has all the markers of being a negative experience. Furthermore, waiting outside practises on the roadside may be too much too soon for dogs not yet de-sensitised or habituated to traffic.

Veterinary professionals can help puppies cope better at their early consultations by doing all or some of the following:

- Asking owners to get their puppies use to seeing people (family members) in masks. Starting off with short durations, have the mask-wearer feed the puppy treats.
- Encourage owners to drive when possible to the clinic and to wait in their car until they are ready to be seen.
- Conduct the majority of the discussion-based part of the consultation over the phone to reduce the time puppies are waiting in the car park or on the roadside (even if the puppy is being held). – If your practise does not allow owners into the clinic with you, stand and chat to the owner for a couple of minutes before being handed the puppy. Feed the puppy high value treats (cooked chicken works well) during carrying, leading, examination and vaccination.
- If the puppy is nervous, give them as much time as possible.
- If time permits (as well as opportunity to disinfect the area), allow all puppies the opportunity to explore the consultation room and conduct the consultation on the floor (rather than on the table). – Offer high value treats by dropping them on the floor first before progressing to offering from the hand. A puppy who easily takes treats is likely more ready for examination.
- Overshadow vaccination with treat nibbling (vaccinate whilst the

puppy nibbles at a treat). This is a proactive two person job to prevent dogs becoming so fearful of the vets they require restraint down the line (also a two, or even three, person job).

- Encourage owners to return to the clinic (even if just to stand outside), feed their puppy lots of high value treats and then leave again. This will make visiting the practise non-contingent on potentially aversive procedures.

Socialisation owners can do prior to vaccination

Owners can play sounds their puppy may hear, especially sounds likely experienced close to home. These may be school playgrounds/children playing, building work, traffic, dogs barking and people shouting. Changing the location of the sound around the home using a portable speaker may help generalise the experience. Sounds must start off at a barely audible volume for short periods of time, and the volume is only increased when puppies appear to be unphased.

Owners can carry pups on brief outings in paposes, puppy backpacks or (if safe enough) in their arms (Figure 2). It is important puppies are carried in quiet locations for short durations first- so not to overwhelm them. As puppies are unable to fully communicate that they wish to avoid something whilst being held, caution must be taken in letting other people or dogs greet them in close proximity. Monitor their responses carefully when they are taken to busier places.

If owners have a front and back garden, time spent out in the garden foraging for treats, training or calm sitting can allow exposure to the surrounding world. It is important owners allow easy retreat back inside to safety should something prove too scary.

To help socialise puppies to different looking people family members can consider wearing hats, long coats, carry a walking stick, carry bags, wear a fake beard (or quickly grow one!). Many dogs are sensitive to people who have an unusual gait or outline/silhouette. It is important owners introduce these things carefully and only when the puppy is 100% confident with them. Putting the item on/using the item first in front of the puppy is safer than suddenly appearing from behind a closed door.



▲ **Figure 2.** Roz and Mohawk, age 10 weeks.

Many dogs during the pandemic are becoming sensitive to unfamiliar people visiting the home, due to reduced number of visitors. Advising on this is tricky due to everybody's individual circumstance and location specific restrictions affecting access to support bubbles and visitors to the home. Owners need to think creatively about making unfamiliar people in and out of the home an enjoyable experience, whether that is having visitors come to the garden or taking advantage of a willing-to-help tradesman, delivery driver or cleaner. The unfamiliar person's presence must be the predictor of enjoyable things (tasty treats) whilst allowing avoidance/distance if the puppy appears to need it from the person in order to feel safe. Interactions with unfamiliar people should be calm. Up-close attention and physical contact must be solicited by the puppy, not the person. – Puppy owners can take puppies for short journeys in the car. Parking in the car parks around walk locations and supermarkets they can prop open the boot/car door, sit with their puppy and allow them the opportunity to observe activity from a distance they can cope (absence of stress signals and avoidance behaviour). It is advisable to start at bigger distances and gradually decrease the distance over time than to start too close and overwhelm the puppy.

Owners may also consider setting up meetings with vaccinated, puppy-friendly adult dogs or other young puppies in a large, secure garden. It is advisable to let the visiting dog have a look around first to get their bearings, then for both dogs to be on (loosely held) leads during initial greetings.

Post-vaccination socialisation

Due to the sensitive socialisation phase, it is advisable pups get out to socialise safely as soon as possible, and taking all risks (health and behaviour) into consideration – this is usually considered to be one week after the second vaccination.

As puppy-exercise and vaccination restrictions can lead to some owners feeling somewhat claustrophobic, once their puppy is vaccinated owners need to be mindful of not catapulting their puppy into the deep-end of socialisation. More than ever, body language awareness is crucial in protecting puppies from being immersed in a world they cannot cope with. Owners will do well to be educated on the following:

Alternating street walks with green walks

Too often I coach owners who are experiencing behaviour issues associated with over stimulation (loss of response to owner, pulling on lead, jumping at people) or feeling overwhelmed (sitting and refusing to move with ears back, pulling for home, loss of response to owner). When people walk their puppy on busy streets the puppy may get lots of unsolicited attention from unfamiliar people in the form of outstretched hands towards the head which can be unpleasant. They may meet other dogs on a short, tight lead preventing the ability to display some social behaviours. This can cause many dogs frustration, anxiety or fear. Puppy walks alongside a busy road may be excessively exposed to traffic, causing sensitisation. Traffic may become more aversive to puppies in dark and wet weather due to headlights and amplified sound of tyres on a wet road.

When walking on the street it is important the puppy is not forced (even if gently) onwards and that they willingly go on their walk. Choosing the right location (a quiet street, a quiet green park) for the individual can spark enthusiasm for navigating the big, wide world on all four paws.

Using a longline and harness

Walking in less busy places, using a longline attached to a harness gives puppies the opportunity to explore uninterrupted by passers-by and regulate their behaviour using the environment. A longline (5–10 metre fixed length lead) attached to a harness gives more freedom for exploring,

opportunity to display more social behaviour (or the desire to move away) during greetings with the added benefit of owners and puppies safely practising recall!

A training & socialisation class

Research has shown attending a well-managed puppy class may reduce the likelihood of problem behaviours down the line (González-Martínez et al., 2019)

Some classes are able to be run outside in Tier 3, weather permitting.

The focus of the class should not be on physical socialisation (i.e., the “puppy party” concept). It should be on learning to concentrate and respond to their owner in the presence of others. – Classes with small groups of dogs with a higher trainer-puppy ratio (for example two trainers to six puppies) can help ensure the experience is well managed.

Social/play time during class should be brief. Often puppy play requires close supervision and regulation. Many puppies start to become over aroused after 10-15 minutes and may play too rough, which may become a negative experience for other participants.

A sudden onset of fear

There is something referred to as “the anecdotal fear period” in dogs. This happens around 6–9 months of age, as dogs become sexually mature and enter adolescence. A once confident dog can seemingly lose all confidence the next day, with no obvious trigger. It is important to rule out any health issues, but if the issue appears to be behavioural then encouraging owners to take things easy with their dog for 2–3 weeks may help. This means calm and quiet walks in less busy locations as well as enabling quality rest with a quiet house.

If classes are not running, having a 1-2-1 with a trainer can prove invaluable. Choosing a behaviourist/trainer that is affiliated with the following organisations will help owners find a good quality class or 1-2-1 support: APDT, ABTC, IAABC, APBC and ASAB.

Summary

Advice given by veterinary professionals may reduce problem behaviour in dogs in later life (Gazzano et al., 2008). Setting up time and resources for those first

consultations may reduce time and resources required down the line by setting dogs up to have positive experiences at the clinic and prevent fear and aggression. Providing owners with generic tips on socialisation- focusing on body language awareness and taking things at the pace of the individual- may further improve dog welfare and prevent behaviour problems developing.

Disclosure statement

The author owns The Mutty Professor, which is a small and independently owned business that provides dog training & behaviour services.

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