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Figure 1a



# Role of puppy parties in socialising and educating puppies

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**ABSTRACT:** Owning a puppy is a very exciting time for owners. It can, however, turn into a nightmare if the right support is not given early on. Veterinary nurses are in a fortunate position that they have the ability to see the puppy during the fundamental learning period of their lives. Running a successful puppy socialisation course can help owners teach their puppies how to have good manners and be a pleasure to own, without having on-going battles over problems that need not have occurred. This article outlines the importance of the law regarding dogs and the changes that have occurred; and important exercises and tasks to teach puppies to act as a secure foundation for later life.

It would not be overdramatic to state that a badly run puppy party has the potential to damage the development of a nervous puppy significantly! For example, imagine a nervous Chihuahua meeting a Boxer puppy for the first time.

The Chihuahua will naturally want to retreat from the Boxer because of its size and bouncy nature, and if the interaction is poorly handled it will learn to become scared of larger dogs. As a result, will become defensive towards all large dogs.

The Boxer, on the other hand, may try many different ways to engage with reticent individuals, potentially resulting in more bouncy and exuberant behaviour with an end result that the two owners have puppies with behaviour problems!

Different practices will implement different approaches to the running of puppy parties. They can vary from a one-

off party through to a course lasting several weeks.

Anecdotal evidence, from a number of sources – such as internet forums and conversations with clients both in the practice and during dog training sessions – would appear to indicate that the general consensus is that clients do not like the way that some puppy parties are run.

### Insist on some order

The typical free-for-all – ‘organised chaos’ that results when all the puppies are allowed off the lead to run around the room – can easily result in nervous puppies becoming more withdrawn and defensive, potentially leading to aggressive behaviour towards other dogs. On top of this the guarding of resources, such as toys, by some individuals will add to the potential for aggression. This increasingly tense environment will ultimately result in unhappy and apprehensive owners.

Whilst allowing all the puppies off the lead at the same time, in principle provides a good chance for them to socialise and play with other puppies in a controlled manner, letting them all off at the same time – as previously stated – can result in mayhem and some puppies will find the environment threatening.

A more sensible approach is to choose two or three dogs of similar temperament

Figure 1b



Figure 2a



and size to be allowed off their leads to play with each other. Allow them to play for a few minutes and then ask their owners to put them back on their leads, while you repeat the process with other puppies present, dividing them into smaller groups of well-matched individuals (Figures 1a & 1b).

Once all the dogs are comfortable with each other, it may be possible to allow them to interact as a whole group, with all the dogs off lead, to play for a maximum of two or three minutes. But this will depend upon your evaluation of all the individuals and you may need to intercede if you feel that any of the puppies is becoming stressed.

Equally, if any puppy seems to be becoming over-boisterous it should be put back on its lead and the owner then asked to engage it in a task, such as a simple 'sit' or 'lie down'. The use of a treat or fuss to praise this task will also reinforce the fact that the removal of the puppy from the play environment is not a punishment, but the opportunity to do something good and be rewarded for it.

Advertising the sessions as 'socialisation classes' as opposed to parties may give the class a more formal approach and make owners more inclined to listen rather than let their puppy off lead within three minutes for it to run riot and cause disturbance to the rest of the group.

### Importance of socialisation

Suitable training and socialisation during the first 16 weeks of a puppy's life will lay the foundations for its behavioural responses in later life. Veterinary nurses and vets are ideally placed to help owners by giving appropriate advice during this critical period.

Figure 2b



One of the most important messages to impart is that it is vital to be consistent from day one! It is also important to stress the necessity that owners teach their puppies to behave in a socially acceptable manner and to teach the puppy the basic exercises, such as 'sit', 'down', 'stay', recall and heelwork.

'Sit' and 'down' are important commands to learn; although it is vital not to force the puppy into the position when teaching the command. Focus on using positive reinforcement in the form of a treat or toy to coax them into the position, and they will respond more quickly than if they are forced into it (Figures 2a, 2b & 2c).

The recall and heel work are perhaps the most important things for a puppy to learn. It is no fun for any owner to be dragged down the street by their dog; and it is acutely embarrassing for them if they are unable to recall it in the park if it starts playing with – or chasing – other dogs.

By introducing these exercises from an early age – rather than when it is an out-of-control six-month old – the puppy is much more capable of learning the appropriate way to behave (Figures 3a & 3b).

Figure 3a



Figure 2c



### Education regarding legal requirements

It is important to address legal issues regarding dog ownership, with clients.

The Dangerous Dogs Act has been amended several times over the past decade as a result of irresponsible owners allowing dogs to show aggression towards the public or other dogs. This has been exacerbated by unthinking owners who allow their dogs to foul parks and beaches and who exercise no control over them in public spaces.

Now any dog that is 'deemed a threat' – regardless of whether it has bitten anyone – can result in the owner being fined or prosecuted, and the dog seized.

Whilst an 11-week old Labrador retriever going for its first walk that jumps up and tries to lick faces may be viewed as cute, when the same Labrador reaches an adult weight of over 30kg, the story changes. Young children and elderly people could be knocked over by such force and under the new laws the owner of the dogs could be prosecuted or fined for not having full control over his or her dog. ❑

Figure 3b




It is a legal requirement for all pet dogs in a public place to wear a collar with a tag which states the owner's name and address. Many clients believe wrongly that the fact their dog is micro-chipped means they are exempt from this requirement. Unfortunately, this is not the case.

The only exceptions under the Control of Dogs Act 1992 are registered guide dogs, dogs being used in emergency rescue work or on official duties accompanying a member of Her Majesty's Armed Forces, HM Customs and Excise or the Police and dogs being used for sporting purposes, such as working gundogs, terriers and any pack of hounds. Full details can be obtained from DEFRA.

Tags cost around £5 and their use could avoid a £5,000 fine! Yet some people are still ambivalent and wary about having their address details on display. However, if their dog is properly trained and under control it is less likely to run off for someone to read it!

On the other hand, if the dog escapes or is stolen, having this information readily accessible should ensure that the dog will be reunited with the owner much more quickly, as not all authorities have access to microchip scanners.

## Conclusion

If run properly, puppy parties provide a beneficial opportunity for training and socialisation of the puppy, together with education of the owner. However, if badly run, things can go horribly wrong and you may end up with a psychologically scarred dog and a disgruntled owner! 

### Useful references

HARGRAVE, C. (2012) Helping puppies to be emotionally robust in domestic environments. BVNA Congress 2012, 7/10/12.

### Control of Dogs Act 1992

[www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/1992/901/article/2/made](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/1992/901/article/2/made) [accessed September 15th 2012].

### Dangerous Dogs Act PDF

[www.defra.gov.uk/publications/files/pb13573-dogs-law-you-leaflet-080515.pdf](http://www.defra.gov.uk/publications/files/pb13573-dogs-law-you-leaflet-080515.pdf) [accessed September 17th 2012].


## NEWS REVIEW

by Jean Turner

### Company gets 'tuff' on dog toys

The Company of Animals is pleased to announce the addition of the Tuffy Toys range. These dog toys come in a variety of shapes and sizes, and have their own toughness scale to help owners select the right one for their dog.

The products are made using up to four layers of different types of material and are filled with a non-toxic fibre, held together by up to seven rows of cross stitching – all bound up in a protective binding. Each toy has a squeak which is encased in a material pocket for additional safety.

For more information, call 01932-566696 or visit [www.companyofanimals.co.uk](http://www.companyofanimals.co.uk) 

### Nominations open for animal welfare awards

Ceva has announced that nominations are now open for its annual animal welfare awards – the chance to recognise individuals in the veterinary industry who go the extra mile to prevent and reduce welfare problems for animals.

Veterinary industry categories include:

- Chris Laurence Vet of the Year Award, in honour of Chris – a welfare expert. This award is for a veterinary surgeon working in practice who consistently demonstrates his or her commitment to the continued improvement of animal welfare;
- Welfare Nurse of the Year Award. This is for a veterinary nurse working in practice who has shown dedication to improving and championing excellent animal welfare.
- Charity Professional of the Year Award. This is for an individual who works within a charity organisation who is consistently driven to perform to the best of their ability, with the single-minded goal of helping save and improve the lives of animals in need.


Winners of all awards will have a choice of luxury prize – ranging from spa weekends, European city breaks, countryside retreats or an animal experience. All individuals who

nominate will automatically be entered into a prize draw to win £250 of high street vouchers.

Ceva will also recognise individuals outside of the veterinary or animal charity sector, with the following categories:

- UK Volunteer Animal Welfare Award, for individuals who have demonstrated dedication to helping animals independently or within a charity – a person who goes above and beyond the call of duty in their free time;
- International Volunteer Animal Welfare Award for those who make changes to the lives of animals around the world. This person must show courage and determination to improve the perception and action of animal welfare in other countries;
- Young Persons Volunteer Animal Welfare Award, for anyone under the age of 16 who has, in their free time, shown compassion in helping aid and bringing joy to animals in need.

The Awards Ceremony will be held on Wednesday 3rd April 2013 during the BSAVA Conference in Birmingham.

Nominations forms are available from [www.ceva.com](http://www.ceva.com) and the deadline for entries is 15th February 2013. For further details or additional nomination forms for your practice, call 01494 781510 or e-mail [welfare.awards@ceva.com](mailto:welfare.awards@ceva.com) 

### VN's drive for innovation wins Trust competition

Registered veterinary nurse, Sarah Hancill, won the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons Charitable Trust's 'Driving Practice Innovation' competition, with her idea for a peripheral venous catheter care checklist.

Sarah has a BSc (Hons) in Veterinary Nursing from the Royal Veterinary College where she gained her foundation degree in veterinary nursing before becoming an RVN in 2011.

Her prize was £100 in shopping vouchers which she intends to spend on a pair of netball shoes. "Playing netball helps me to deal with the stresses of being a veterinary nurse," she said. 