

Partying puppies behave better

Good time puppies are much less likely to develop behavioural problems than party shy canines, latest statistics show

A NEW study by the Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors (APBC), sponsored by animal health company Intervet UK, says that the majority of dogs referred to them in 1997 were poorly socialised in their first few months of life.

"If a puppy is given a little or no exposure to other dogs early in life it has no idea how to deal with them when it encounters them later and is naturally afraid," says Emma Magnus, one of the report's authors. "Like humans, puppies need to develop their communication skills with a range of individuals."

However, dogs raised with a canine companion tended towards a high rate of referral for aggression towards other dogs and fear related problems generally. This suggests that puppies are not getting the individual socialisation they need. It could also suggest that owners do not take their puppy out and about as much if they have another dog. "What's becoming clear is that puppies must be well socialised without the support of their companion some of the time," said Ms Magnus.

To familiarise puppies with other dogs and to get them used to being handled, many veterinary practices now run puppy parties. Special puppy classes are also run by trainers. From the owners' point of view, veterinary run parties also offer an ideal opportunity to learn about important health-care issues, such as vaccination and nutrition.

The earlier a puppy mixes with other dogs the better, so get it to a well run party and a course of well run classes as soon as vaccination is complete.

The APBC study also revealed that the best adjusted dogs tend to come from a home environment. "A domestic environment provides all the noise and activity that puppies need to be able to cope with life's experiences," says Ms Magnus. "The key is to expose them to a family household throughout their first weeks of life, because broad experience in the first six to eight weeks is vital."

From a sample of 1,222 dogs referred to the APBC in 1997, almost two-thirds were males. The most common problem was aggression towards people (28%), followed by aggression towards other dogs (19%). Behavioural problems caused by separation from owners was another fairly common problem, accounting for around 15% of referrals.

"Most behavioural problems can be prevented through positive socialisation and habituation at the earliest possible age," says Ms Magnus. "Advances in vaccination are making this increasingly possible."

The APBC's annual review of cases was written by Emma Magnus Msc, David Appleby DipCABC and Gwen Bailey Bsc.