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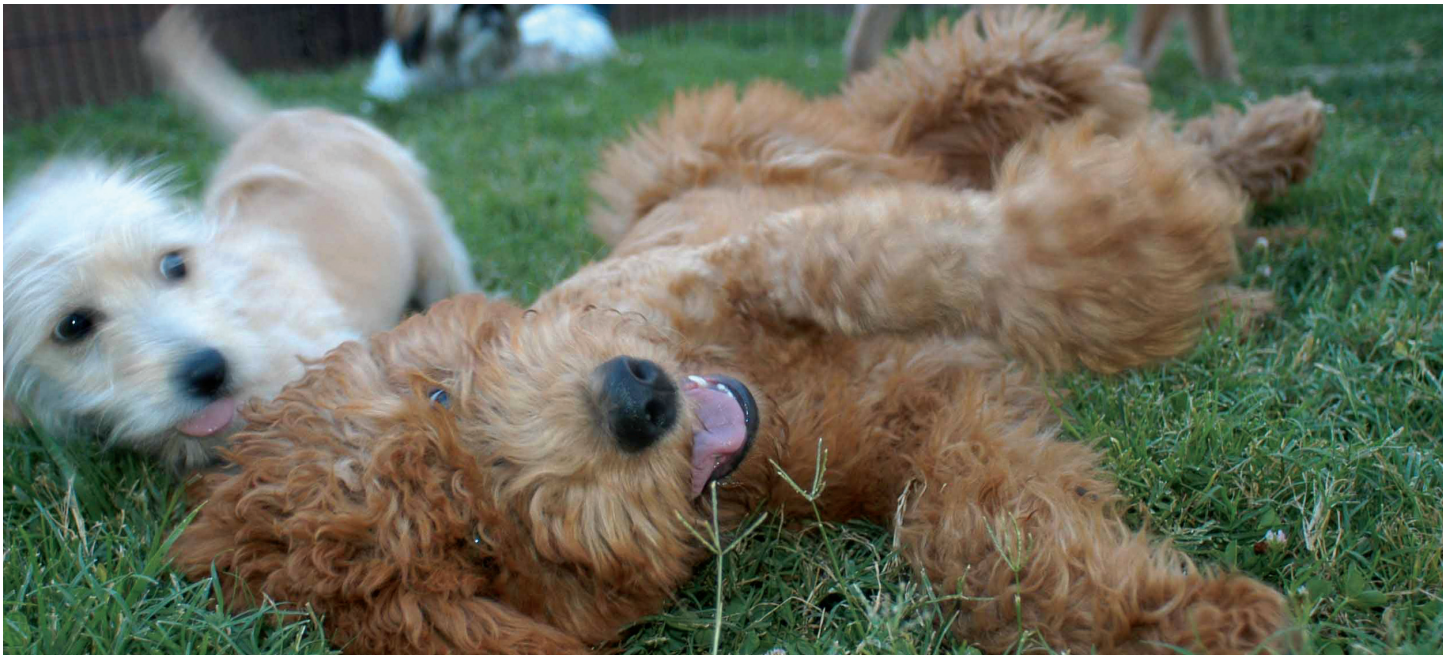






AVSAB Position Statement On Puppy Socialization

American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior
www.AVSABonline.org



THE PRIMARY AND MOST IMPORTANT time for puppy socialization is the first three months of life.[1,2] During this time puppies should be exposed to as many new people, animals, stimuli and environments as can be achieved safely and without causing overstimulation manifested as excessive fear, withdrawal or avoidance behavior. For this reason, the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior believes that it should be the standard of care for puppies to receive such socialization before they are fully vaccinated.

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Because the first three months are the period when sociability outweighs fear, this is the primary window of opportunity for puppies to adapt to new people, animals, and experiences. Incomplete or improper socialization during this important time can increase the risk of behavioral problems later in life including fear, avoidance, and/or aggression. Behavioral problems are the greatest threat to the owner-dog bond. In fact, behavioral problems are the number one cause of relinquishment to shelters.[3] Behavioral issues, not infectious diseases, are the number one cause of death for dogs under three years of age.

While puppies' immune systems are still developing during these early months, the combination of maternal immunity, primary vaccination, and appropriate care makes the risk of infection relatively small compared to the chance of death from a behavior problem.

Veterinarians specializing in behavior recommend that owners take advantage of every safe opportunity to expose young puppies to the great variety of stimuli that they will experience in their lives. Enrolling in puppy classes prior to three months of age can be an excellent means of improving training, strengthening the human-animal bond, and socializing puppies in an environment where risk of illness can be minimized.

In general, puppies can start puppy socialization classes as early as 7-8 weeks of age. Puppies should receive a minimum of one set of vaccines at least 7 days prior to the first class and a first deworming. They should be kept up-to-date on vaccines throughout the class.

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The Process of Socialization:

Puppies should be handled from birth, learning to accept manipulation of all body parts. Every effort should be made to expose them to as many different people, well-socialized animals, situations, places, etc. as possible. Puppies should be encouraged to explore, investigate, and manipulate their environments. Interactive toys and games, a variety of surfaces, tunnels, steps, chutes, and other stimuli can enrich the puppy's environment. Puppies should accompany their breeders/owners on as many car trips as possible. These exposures should continue into adulthood to maintain an outgoing and sociable dog.

Puppy socialization classes can offer a safe and organized means of socializing puppies and more quickly improve their responsiveness to commands.[4] Each puppy should have up-to-date vaccinations and be disease and parasite free before entering the class. Where possible, classes should be held on surfaces that are easily cleaned and disinfected (e.g. indoor environments). Visits to dog parks or other areas that are not sanitized and/or are highly trafficked by dogs of unknown vaccination or disease status should be avoided.

Classes and at-home training should be based on positive reinforcement with frequent rewards praise, petting, play and/or treats. Positive and consistent training is associated with fewer behavioral problems and greater obedience than methods that involve punishment and/or encourage human dominance.[4,5,6]

Time must be scheduled for puppies to play alone with their favorite toys (such as stuffed food toys) or take naps in safe places such as crates or puppy pens. This teaches puppies to amuse themselves, and may help to prevent problems of over attachment to the owners. Continuing to offer dogs a wide variety of experiences during their first year of life is also helpful in preventing separation-related behavior.[7]

Proper confinement training using pens or crates helps to ensure that puppies have safe and secure places for rest and confinement. Puppies that are used to being crated will be less stressed if they must be hospitalized or be confined for travel by plane or car. Crates should serve as comfort or play areas.

Early and adequate socialization and programs of positive training can go a long way to preventing behavior problems and improving bonding between humans and dogs. While the first three months is the most important socialization period in a puppy's life, owners of puppies that have passed this milestone are strongly encouraged to continue to socialize their puppies to as many people, pets, and locations as is practical. However, owners of puppies displaying fear should seek veterinary guidance.

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