

APDTNZ Position Statement

Puppy Socialisation Opportunities



The Association of Professional Dog Trainers New Zealand (APDTNZ) believes that careful and comprehensive efforts must be made to socialise puppies during the first 4 months of life, even before being fully vaccinated. (1, 2, 14)

It is important to consult with local veterinarians about the risk of certain activities in the specific area about disease risk, however, early socialisation is crucial to helping puppies learn about their environment and for healthy cognitive development.

During their first three to four months of life, puppies' sociability generally outweighs their fear (1) and they are most open to learning about the world in which they live (3). This period in a puppy's life is known as the "sensitive period."



Successful socialisation during this period is vital to raising a puppy to be a confident adult dog who has learned not only how to behave and cope

successfully in a variety of situations, but also may help to prevent fear, stress, anxiety, and aggressive behaviour in adulthood. (1, 4, 5) In the absence of socialisation during puppyhood, adult dogs are at an increased risk of developing problems with fear, aggression, and arousal. (6)

Such behavioural problems are a great threat to the parent-dog relationship. They are the number one reason for relinquishment to shelters and cause of death for dogs under 3 years of age, more so than infectious disease. (1)



What is socialisation?

Socialisation is the provision of positive learning opportunities in which a puppy is introduced to their environment. Gentle exposure to a variety of experiences and stimuli is crucial. The goal is for the dog to be able to cope and learn appropriate skills to be content around a variety of people, animals, sights, smells, sounds, sensations, spaces, and environments.

During the socialisation process, habituation, often together with classical conditioning, should be used to expose puppies to novel stimuli and



experiences. Socialisation is important for the development of motor skills and learning about a puppy's new environment. It is essential to implement this process systematically so as not to flood the puppy, which could potentially have long term ramifications. Therefore, the puppy should always dictate the pace of exposure and have the choice to control their movements freely without force or coercion. Systematic desensitisation and counter-

conditioning protocols can be implemented if a puppy is fearful or anxious of particular stimuli in their environment.

When is the sensitive period?

The sensitive period for puppies is approximately 3-16 weeks of age (2); socialisation should commence during this period. Puppies are at a stage of their neurological development to start exploring unfamiliar physical and social environments by 8-9 weeks of age, which often coincides with the time when a family welcomes their puppy into their home. If this exploration is delayed until after 14 weeks of age, research suggests that puppies lose such adaptability and may exhibit lifelong fear. (7, 8, 9)

While the prime socialisation period finishes around 14-16 weeks of age, socialisation opportunities must continue for at least the first 9-12 months



as ongoing reinforcement of the experiences is important for them to be remembered (2, 10).

Also occurring during the sensitive period is the puppy's first Fear Period at approximately 8-10 weeks of age. During a fear period, puppies become hypersensitive and there is a greater risk of a negative experience having a lifelong impact on the puppy. A second fear impact period occurs sometime during adolescence, anywhere from 6-months of age to 16 or 17 months or age. For this reason, ongoing positive experiences are particularly crucial for successful socialisation. (2, 11)

What does socialisation look like?

The APDTNZ believes in thoughtfully planning a socialisation schedule. A socialisation schedule suggests exposing a puppy to a few new stimuli or experiences daily. Short, frequent, positive exposures to novel stimuli is the key to successful socialisation, rather than grouping all experiences together in a short period of time. Please see resources for further information.

Furthermore, the importance of socialising a puppy to fit each family's lifestyle specifically is imperative. For example, if you can anticipate that the puppy will often be attending your child's football games, extra time should be dedicated to habituating the puppy to the sound of the whistle and the cheers of the nearby crowd.

It is also vital to expose puppies to different stimuli that they may not experience regularly, such as thunderstorms or fireworks. These events can be extremely stressful for some dogs. For example, a YouTube audio clip of fireworks can be introduced at a low volume while paired with play or high value treats. Over several weeks, the volume can gradually increase until the puppy becomes desensitised to the noise at a regular volume.

Additionally, handling and tactile stimulation is also a crucial part of a successful socialisation for the health and welfare of a puppy. Handling for husbandry, veterinary procedures and grooming will be necessary for all dogs. Such occasions, such as visits to the veterinary clinic or groomer, for example, can be made less stressful by incorporating positive experiences,

“friendly” visits, and daily handling, where the puppy can make positive associations.



Prior to Adoption or Purchase

The APDTNZ believes that socialisation should begin before weaning as the sensitive period of socialisation begins at 3-weeks of age. When



considering purchasing a puppy, it is important to take due care when selecting a breeder who follows specific socialisation protocols. As a large portion of the sensitive period falls before a puppy arrives in human homes, this puts a notable responsibility on the breeder to implement an appropriate early neurological stimulation and socialisation plan.

To achieve this, a breeder actively introduces the puppies to changes in temperature, texture, and sensation. The sensitive period is when puppies build relationships with humans and other animals as well. Therefore, exposure to humans, other animals, and other socially appropriate dogs are essential during the sensitive period if implemented in a controlled and positive way.

As dog training professionals

The APDTNZ believes that, as dog training professionals, it is vital that we consider the sensitive period of the individual dogs we work with especially when we are troubleshooting or implementing any behaviour changes later in life. As mentioned, the first three to four months can lay the foundations for any lifelong associations.

The APDTNZ recommends the following steps for successful socialisation of new puppies:

- Puppies sleep approximately 18-20 hours a day between the ages of 8-12 weeks. They are also at a vulnerable stage physiologically.



Whilst it's essential to socialise a new puppy to as many different experiences as possible, it is recommended that ample sleep is facilitated.

- Too much socialisation can result in the flooding and/or sensitisation to stimuli in their environment. Therefore, it is advised to keep sessions short, positive and to allow the puppy to move at their own pace, free of force.
- Well organised puppy classes are a safe and controlled way to help the socialisation process. They also function well to build a strong, trusting bond between the human caregiver and the puppy. (12)
- It is essential to consult with a local veterinarian about the risks of contracting a disease before the puppy has received their full set of vaccinations. An example of a safe handling during an excursion could be to carry the puppy instead of letting them walk in, high risk areas, reducing the risk of exposure to pathogens.

Conclusion

The APDTNZ believes that due care must be taken when planning and implementing socialisation during the sensitive period for the prosperity of all dogs. The APDTNZ strongly believes in the importance of a quality socialisation protocol. It is imperative to facilitate puppies in the exploration and, investigation of their environment, and to provide adequate enrichment through the use of interactive toys, games, and other mental stimulation to encourage and inspire confidence.

Resources

- [A great socialisation guide can be found by Dr. Sophia Yin here.](#)
- [An example of an early neurological stimulation program is Puppy Culture. Find out more information here.](#)
- [Flooding: find out more about it here.](#) (16)

References:

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