



Bristol and District Branch
Registered charity number 205858

RSPCA Bristol Animal Clinic

SOCIALIZATION OF YOUR DOG

In order for dogs to live happily in their human families, without unacceptable behaviour being a problem, early and effective socialization is essential. Behaviour problems are the biggest cause of euthanasia of dogs in the UK, and most of these sad situations could have been prevented. When we refer to socialization we mean the process when your dog becomes accustomed to being handled, mixing with new people, dogs and other animals, and the general sights and sounds of modern life.

Because of the way a dog's brain develops, **the most crucial period is from 3 to 12 weeks of age**. This means that if you acquire a puppy at 8 or 9 weeks, you need to start now, even before the vaccination course is complete (without putting your pet's physical health at risk). A puppy which remains unsocialized after 12 weeks may be fearful for life, despite training to new situations.

How to have a sociable dog...

It is crucial to remember that **everything you do with your dog is a form of training**. Dogs learn by association and a behaviour (whether good or bad) will be **reinforced** by talking to your dog, touching him or giving him a treat.

So if, for example, you keep telling your dog off for jumping up at people, you are 'rewarding him' with attention. Ignore behaviour that you don't want to encourage. This can be difficult, but is much easier to do now than later in life.

Similarly, if you comfort your dog when he is afraid, he will become more afraid. This natural reaction for a human can have catastrophic effects on a dog, making fear-motivated aggression more likely in later life. When signs of fear are apparent, take it slowly and when the dog is calm, then give him an appropriate reward- a treat or affection- at that stage.

- **Handling.** Ask new people to handle your puppy. When he has learnt to sit, train him to sit when meeting people, and reward this with a treat. Start early in life getting him used to grooming, bathing and nail clipping, and get him used to looking in the ears, eyes, mouth etc when he is calm.
- **Sights and sounds.** Make sure your dog has safe exposure to vehicles, children, vacuum cleaners etc. Don't overwhelm him, but don't accidentally reinforce a fearful reaction by comforting him if scared.

- **Status.** The period up to 18 months old is important in the settling of your dog's status in the family. During this time he is very aware of 'social gestures'. Many difficulties and potentially dangerous situations are created by accidental 'deference'- such as allowing him to sleep on beds and furniture, pull on the lead and take control of games. Depending on your dog's breed and personality, he will value 'resources' such as food, toys and attention differently. Make sure you are in charge of these. It is not cruel to ignore attention-seeking behaviour such as pawing and whining- by doing so consistently your dog won't be anxious and confused by conflicting messages about its status. Teach your dog to earn attention by obeying a simple command such as 'sit'.
- **Meeting other dogs.** Meetings with placid vaccinated dogs are a great idea while your dog is awaiting vaccination. He can then learn social skills for life at the right stage of his development, without being at risk of illness.
- **Play.** Play between dogs, especially play-biting, is essential to development but can be alarmingly vigorous. Well-intentioned but unnecessary human interference can result in a dog being unable to communicate via body language with other dogs or not knowing the strength of his own bite and therefore being dangerous to other dogs and people.
- **Puppy classes** can help your dog's early socialization but only if techniques are put into practice consistently at home.
- **Neutering** at an early age will dramatically reduce the likelihood of some problem behaviours developing, but won't prevent problems in the absence of socialization and training.
- **Normal behaviour.** Don't forget that things like digging, chewing and barking are all normal to your dog. The aim is to train him to do these things in a socially acceptable way. For example, reinforce chewing with durable toys that can't be confused with your possessions, and use anti-chew deterrents if necessary.
- **Don't punish** your dog harshly. Punishment is more likely to create fear of situations or people than it is to prevent inappropriate behaviour.
- **Exercise.** Plenty of exercise will make almost all social behaviour problems less likely. Working breeds such as Collies must have plenty of mental and physical stimulation.