

Prevent Future Shelter Dogs

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It was once believed that only mixed breed dogs were surrendered to the local animal shelters. Unfortunately, an estimated 25-30% of dogs surrendered to humane shelters are purebred dogs. As dog enthusiasts we take every step to ensure sound, healthy, well-adjusted, happy dogs. But, how do we prevent our dogs from becoming future shelter dogs? By properly socializing the puppy from the day he is born you will increase the probability of placement in a forever home.

Following is a review of the stages of canine social development, which can help us to better understand where socialization is the most critical.

The five stages of Canine Social Development: (Dunbar, Lindsay):

Neonatal Period – Birth to 13 days: Puppies are born deaf and blind. Sensitivities to pressure, movement, taste, light and smell exist. Most of the puppy’s time is spent sleeping (90%) and nursing (10%). Investigatory behavior is dependent on touch. Pups will vocalize in response to pain, cold and hunger. The ability to regulate their own body temperature has not fully developed so puppies will often sleep in a communal pile.

Transitional Period – 14 to 21 days: Rapid maturation of the senses and major changes in motor behavior patterns. Eyes open at 2 weeks, ears open at 3 weeks. Puppies can support themselves and begin walking unsteadily as early as 12 days. Investigatory behavior is based on sight and sound. Approach behavior develops and puppies begin to engage in playful biting and pawing. Teeth begin to emerge. Avoidance to pain response is seen at this age. Mother may regurgitate partially digested semi-solid food. EEG patterns vary little between sleeping and wake states.

Socialization Period – 3 to 12 weeks of age: The MOST influential 9 weeks of a puppy’s life. Associated with the development of many social patterns and learning about the environment. Much of what is learned during this early period is lasting, providing a foundation for many adult behavior patterns and problems. Many social and emotional deficits observed in adult dogs are believed to result from removing puppies too early from the mother and littermates.

➤ Independence as mother leaves whelping area more frequently	➤ Active and Passive agonistic behaviors (hip slams, muzzle bites, mouthing)	➤ Predatory behaviors – stalking, pouncing, shaking
Retina develops	➤ Playful Behaviors	➤ Weaning begins
➤ Problem solving ability	➤ Dominant/subordinate relationships	➤ Increased vocalizations
➤ Trainability	➤ Exploration of inanimate objects	➤ Social affinities
➤ Allelomimetic (group coordinated) behaviors	➤ General activity levels	➤ Fear and Avoidance
	➤ General learning	➤ Responsiveness
➤ Sexual Behavior	➤ Exploratory behavior	➤ Bite Inhibition
➤ Ability to identify people and animals at a distance	➤ Facial expressions develop	➤ Pups begin to leave sleeping area to urinate and defecate

➤ Tail wagging develops	➤ Cooperation/competition	➤ Reaction to Separation
➤ Appetites/aversions	➤ Adult EEG patterns	➤ Approach /Avoidance

Juvenile Period – 12 Weeks to 6 Months: A gradual improvement of motor skills occurs along with strength of activity. Learning capacities are fully developed. Juvenile puppies show an increased tendency to explore their environment. Permanent teeth are present by 6 months of age.

Adult Period – 6 Months: The development of sexual maturity marks the onset of adulthood. Dogs increase in size and strength through their second year with some variation due to breed and size. Social maturity continues on into adulthood.

1. Dr. Ian Dunbar - *Dog Behavior. Why Dogs Do What They Do.* 1979.
2. *The Handbook of Applied Dog Behavior and Training. Volume 1.* Steven R. Lindsay. 2000.

According to the National Council of Pet Population Study and Policy and reported in the Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science - 47.7% of dogs surrendered to shelters are between 5 months and 3 years of age and an astonishing 96% of dogs surrendered have had no obedience or basic manners training. Behavior issues including aggression toward other animals and/or people, barking, chewing, hyperactivity and house soiling are the primary reasons people surrender their dogs to local shelters.

Initially, the task of properly socializing a pup falls to the breeder as the most critical period of development is between birth and 12 weeks. It is recommended that a pup not be permanently removed from mom and littermates until he is at least 9 weeks of age to allow for increased social skills such as mouth awareness (bite inhibition - the single most important skill in any animal) and frustration tolerance.

Before a pup reaches 9 weeks of age and is placed in his new home, he should meet and be gently and properly handled by 100 (yes, 100!) new people of various size and age. He should interact with people who use a walker, are on crutches, or with strollers, should be exposed to people who are running (or jogging) on roller blades, bicycles etc. The pup should be introduced and routinely exposed to “household noises” such as a television, vacuum cleaner, toilet flushing, telephone ringing, items being dropped on the floor, children crying/laughing/ screaming, etc.

Many breeders live in beautiful rural locations, which may not prepare a puppy for urban living. Therefore socializing very young puppies to traffic noises, environments other than the whelping area, taking road trips into town if necessary and, in some cases bringing pups along for a day at the office will help them readily accept each novel environment.

Puppies should be encouraged to walk on and investigate various surfaces such as hardwood, carpet, tile, vinyl, across a plastic garbage bag, through grass, wet grass, tall grass, over crushed ice, gravel, concrete, dirt and mud. Puppies should have the opportunity to crawl over, around and through brush and twigs and be walked through water puddles. Although these steps may sound extreme these are in fact true-life situations that all dogs will eventually encounter.

To assist in the smooth transition to a new family it is recommended that puppies be introduced to crating and for short times (slowly increasing to greater amounts of time) be separated from mom and littermates. By beginning separation training prior to placement in a new home stress will be reduced for both the pup and the new family during those first few days.

House training, crate training, grooming, socialization to people, places, and other pets from the very beginning will ensure placement of a “pet quality dog” rather than “livestock”. To a busy family, adopting livestock rather than a pet can be completely overwhelming and the difference between the dog staying in the home or going to the shelter surrendered due to “behavioral problems”.

Continued proper socialization and training by the adopting family is a *must* and should be strongly encouraged. During the first thirty days in a new home the puppy should be introduced to another 100 new people (not all at the same time!), three new well mannered dogs per day (living with a housemate dog or two is not nearly enough socialization), new places, visits to the veterinarian on non appointment days, pet stores, walks in new neighborhoods, etc.

All puppies, regardless of owner experience, should be enrolled in a well-run, positive training class prior to 16 weeks of age for continued socialization opportunities. Whether this is the 75th dog you’ve lived with or you have never lived with a dog in your life – it’s a brand new “game” to the pup and he will benefit greatly from the positive exposure to new people, dogs, and training challenges. Unfortunately, many preventable behavior and temperament issues occur due to lack of proper early socialization, the use of outdated and ineffective training techniques or by not training at all. These are the dogs that end up in your local shelter.

For a list of positive trainers close to home, families can be directed to the Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers at www.ccpdt.org or, the Association of Pet Dog Trainers at www.apdt.com

Armed with the knowledge of critical developmental periods, the importance of early socialization and a strong commitment to providing the necessary training required we can increase the likelihood that our dogs will stay IN their family and OUT of the local shelter.

“Shelter Dogs are Made Not Born ~ Don’t make another shelter dog. All shelter dogs were once normal puppies eager to learn how to live with people. Puppyhood is the time to “rescue” adult shelter dogs.” **Dr. Ian Dunbar PhD, BVetMed MRCVS**

* Dr. Ian Dunbar's DogStarDaily.com multi-media puppy raising guide provides all you need to know to raise your puppy, including free downloads of “BEFORE You Get Your Puppy” and “AFTER You Get Your Puppy”.