



# The Importance of Puppy Socialisation

The old belief (that is unfortunately still being pushed by some), that puppies must be kept isolated until they have received all their vaccinations, can have disastrous results for puppies. These days, together with scientific understanding of the critical period of early social development in the dog and with improved vaccines, it is not only important to expose the puppy to the outside world at an early age, it is crucial! The famous American animal behaviourist, Shelby Marlo puts it nicely in her book "New Age of Training Dogs":

*"Keeping the dog behind closed doors is not the panacea you think it to be. Unless this dog is living in a bubble, he will never be safe from exposure to disease. You can step in animal waste and inadvertently track it into your home on the soles of your shoes. In fact, isolating your young puppy from the world could foster more harm than good. If you don't socialise your puppy prior to three months of age, you run the very real risk of creating a fearful, antisocial dog."*

*"By taking calculated risks like going to a puppy class where all participants are vaccinated and healthy, visiting friends who have healthy dogs; taking the puppy for drives in the car on errands; having puppy parties to which you invite acquaintances of all colours, sizes and ages, you will create a well-rounded confident adult dog that is worldly in his views of the human realm."*

Therefore, unless you keep your puppy in a confined incubator until it has had all of its vaccinations, you will always run the risk of him/her catching parvo. Birds can fly into your backyard and deliver parvo, you can tread on it and bring it home. There are so many ways a pup can contract parvo...and unfortunately it's not a green blob that you can see and avoid.

## **What is the "Critical Socialisation Period"?**

The Critical Socialisation Period is the period of the first 16 weeks of the puppy's life. This is where puppies learn about the world around them, become familiar with things they are exposed to as well as certain experiences and situations presented to them. All dogs are born fearful of humans and other objects, it is only through early exposure and socialisation that puppies grow to become familiar and confident with these. Isolating puppies during this Critical Socialisation period, usually results in fearfulness and over-reactive tendencies. Fearful puppies may then grow up to be fearful dogs, which may growl and even bite to protect themselves from what they perceive as a threat.

The puppy's brain grows in volume by the number of cell connections made within the brain. During the first 16 weeks of life, 80% of these "connections" in cells are being made. The number of "connections" varies on what the puppy is exposed to, sees and experiences during the growth (critical) period. The more environment exposure and socialisation the puppy receives during this time, the larger the brain. It is not a psychological phenomenon, but rather the growth of the brain and the dog's capacity to learn and take in information. Therefore socialising your puppy is not only imperative for a confident, friendly dog, but also imperative to create a dog who is easily trainable....oh and a good brain size too!!

The remaining 20% of brain growth occurs from 17 weeks to 12 months. So you can see why the first 16 weeks is "critical" as this is when the majority of brain growth occurs.

## **Start a training and socialisation program with your puppy at 8/9 weeks of age.**

Early training and exposure is essential in the development of a confident and well behaved animal. Many responsible pet owners take their puppies to reputable training schools who offer well structured training and socialisation programs for puppies. You may wish to begin your puppy's training at a puppy pre-school conducted by your local vet where they will later point you in the direction of a reputable training centre. Whichever course you choose to take, you should definitely begin taking your puppy to school as soon as your pup reaches 8 weeks of age to ensure your dog grows up free of unnecessary fears.

### **Good places to socialise your pup**

- Puppy classes run by accredited instructors
- Shopping centre entrances! Sit just outside the entrance doors with your pup and watch the world go by. Patting by strangers is wonderful socialisation with the added bonus of exposure to shopping trolleys, cars and foot traffic.
- Puppy Parties: Get some of your friends together who also have young pups and organise a Puppy Party, but please ensure these are supervised and that all puppies have commenced their vaccination regimes.
- Car Rides: Many pups only ever go for a car ride when going to the vets, therefore it is no wonder the pup learns to hate the car ride. Take pup on as many errands as possible in the car. Use a travel crate or approved car harness if your pup tends to jump around.
- Train/Tram rides: If the driver lets you on, get on with your pup and enjoy the scenery together.

### **Stay Away from**

- Off leash parks: You don't know what sort of dogs frequent there and most importantly if they are vaccinated or not. Many young pups have been the victim of attacks at off-leash parks resulting in severe trauma and fear based behaviours.
- Well meaning friends with large, boisterous dogs or dogs with known aggression problems: You get the picture!!

☆ The decision not to socialise your pup before he has had all of his vaccination is yours solely, however keep in mind that you can never reserve the effects of inadequate or incomplete puppy socialisation.

☆ Wherever you wish to take your dog as an adult, take it there as a puppy - but be prudent of course!!