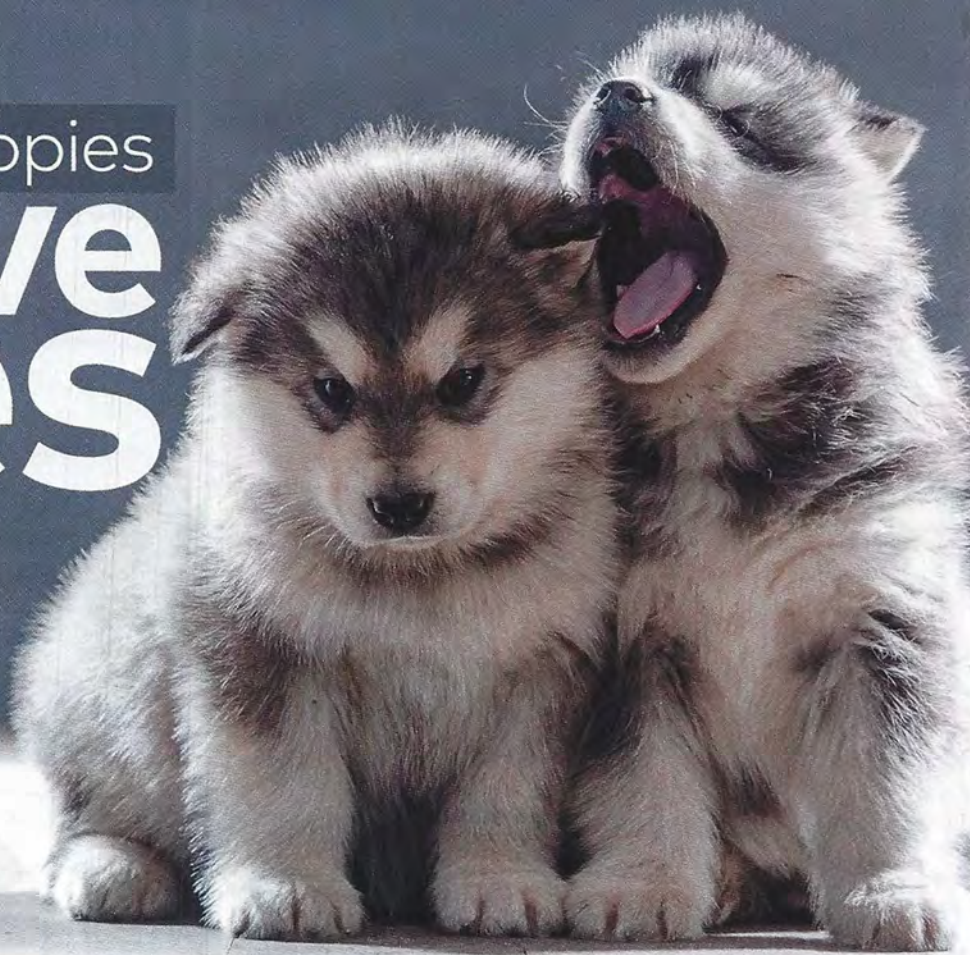


Socialize puppies and **save lives**

These classes are an easy way to integrate behavior counseling into your practice, and create lifelong bonds with new patients.

By Hilal Dogan, BVSc



According to a 2013 study,

65% of pet owners who decided not to keep their pets in the home reported some behavioral reason for relinquishment, and

49% of those who relinquished their pet indicated that at least one difficult behavior was a strong influence on their decision to hand their pet over.

Source: Kwan JY, Bain MJ. Owner attachment and problem behaviors related to relinquishment and training techniques of dogs. *J Appl Anim Welf Sci* 2013;16:168-183.

Research has shown that behavior issues are one of the most common reasons a pet is relinquished to a shelter. But as veterinarians, we have the chance to intervene in the lives of our patients and curb those problems before they start. Not only will puppy classes add a new revenue stream for your practice, but they'll let you dip your toes into the behavior pool if you're not doing a lot of behavior counseling already. The puppies win, the clients win and your practice wins—with bonded clients who come back for the lifetime of their new pet. Here's

why puppy socialization classes are important.

No, it's not social media

Posting cute pics of their new puppy on social media might be a fun pastime for new pet parents, but it really isn't helping the pup's social life at all. Here's what you need to know about puppy socialization classes.

Puppies are most open to novel experiences during their socialization period and this is the perfect time to expose them to as many new things and experiences as possible in a safe, proactive and positive manner so they develop

healthy coping skills, says Fetch dvm360 conference speaker Debbie Martin, CPDT-KA, KPA CTP, LVT, VTS (behavior). There are two different stages of socialization, primary and secondary.

The primary socialization period occurs, on average, between 3 and 5 weeks of age. This is when the puppy is learning to be a dog and should be with its littermates and its mother.

The secondary socialization period occurs between 6 and 12 weeks of age, but can last up to 16 weeks with large-breed dogs because they mature more slowly. This is when dogs learn how to interact with people, Martin says. Note—puppies really shouldn't go to a home until at least 8 weeks of age, ideally; they are more likely to have behavior issues if they leave home too soon.¹

These are the key weeks to introduce the puppy to as many new things as possible in a protective and thoughtful way to ensure positive experiences and learning without overwhelming the puppy. Lack of exposure can be as detrimental as a bad experience, Martin says. The single most important thing new pup parents can do is enroll in a proper socialization program with their puppies.

Why you should offer puppy classes

As veterinarians, we can identify high-risk puppies (excessive mouthiness, separation anxiety) early on and get them proper treatment. We can decrease relinquishment to shelters by building empathy and understanding in owners and strengthening the human animal bond early on, Martin says. This is because owners are still in love with the puppies at this time. You don't want to wait until owners are at wits' end and crying. Catch

them while they are still happy with their dog so they want to work on possible issues. This can also bond the animals to your hospital because of early happy memories of "good times." It can also bond clients to you when you see them from puppyhood on.

How to start puppy classes at your practice

Ideal participants:

Healthy puppies that are between 7 and 12 weeks of age. Don't make exceptions and allow older dogs to join the class, Martin says. Puppies should finish the class by the time they are 16 weeks of age.

Location:

The area where the class is held needs to be puppy-proof, escape-proof, easy to sanitize and indoors to prevent weather-related disruptions, Martin says. It should also be a nondistracting environment. After-hours veterinary hospitals are wonderful locations—you can use the lobby area to start, and then split up to exam rooms for exploration, Martin suggests.

Style of class:

Set up different stations for the puppies to explore. Class size varies—have a minimum of two instructors per class. You want to have a maximum of three or four puppies per instructor or assistant to make sure everyone is being observed and having a good experience, Martin says. Instructors and assistants must be knowledgeable in animal behavior, proper socialization and positive training techniques. This is an impressionable time in the dog's development. Inappropriate socialization techniques could result in irreparable emotional damage to the puppy, result-

Expert tip:

If you have a mouthy breed, the first thing you need to teach the owner is to put a toy in the puppy's mouth before starting human interaction! This is key to not ending up with scarred and scratched up hands, Martin says.



ing in fear and anxiety. Online orientation and open enrollment seem to work the best and are less limiting for clients and puppies. Once owners hear about the class, they get excited and want to start right away.

Promotion:

To promote the class, hang permanent signs on your clinic walls and in exam rooms. Include a message on your phone system's "hold" messages, Martin says. If the pet owner signs up on their first puppy visit, include it in the cost of the visit and offer a discount. On your website, social media and in practice newsletters you can promote it with cute pictures of puppies that will catch your clients' eyes.

Disease prevention:

A healthy puppy is current on vaccines and dewormed and should have had a recent routine veterinary exam (within the past 21 days). It should have normal stools and good appetite, be bright, alert and responsive, and be free of coughing, sneezing, discolored eye or nasal discharge and skin lesions, Martin says. Make sure owners are aware of these signs, so they don't bring their puppies to class when they are ill. Each time the puppy comes to class, do a brief physical

check (a mini exam as you're saying hello) before allowing it to join the group. Instructors need to make sure they have a change of clothes and shoes they can put on between seeing patients and starting puppy class so they don't act as fomites, bringing disease into the class.

See "Ready to get started? Here's what to cover" on the right for Martin's suggestions on the class content. For more information on how to structure the class, you can complete the online course Martin and Kenneth Martin, DVM, DACVB, offer called "Puppy Start Right for Instructors." Visit puppystartright.com to get started.

Reference

1. Pierantoni L, Albertini M, Pirrone F. Prevalence of owner-reported behaviours in dogs separated from the litter at two different ages. *Vet Rec* 2011;169(18):468.



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Ready to get started? Here's what to cover.

By Debbie Martin, CPDT-KA, KPA CTP, LVT, VTS (behavior)

Puppy socialization classes should be well-organized, and the instructors should work to keep the class on track. Physical or verbal reprimands should not be used.

Suggested class outline:

- > Off-leash controlled play—5 minutes
- > Introduction to training—2 minutes
- > Problem prevention topic—15 minutes
- > Exploration—25 to 30 minutes
- > Off-leash controlled play—5 minutes
- > Second problem prevention topic—5 minutes
- > Pass the puppy—5 minutes
- > Announcements and homework assignment—2 minutes

Control the off-leash play sessions, and make sure the owners remain seated. Keep treats and belongings out of reach of the puppies. If inappropriate play occurs, the instructors should be the ones to interrupt.

If the puppies are having trouble self-regulating, or if other puppies are showing signs of fear, don't verbally or physically reprimand the puppy. Instead, use a high-value treat or squeaky toy to get the instigating puppy's attention and redirect it. Be sure to practice redirections and recalls at other times during the play as well. An overexuberant puppy may need to be managed separately to facilitate redirection.

In the four-week class period, training topics should include:

- > Attention
- > Targeting
- > Sit
- > Come
- > Leave it/drop
- > An introduction to leash manners

It's important to educate clients on the benefits of positive reinforcement training and the problems associated with positive punishment. Though basic training is introduced in the puppy class, the goal is proper socialization and problem prevention, not training.

Problem prevention topics to cover include:

- > Crate training
- > Restraint and handling
- > Potty training
- > Socialization
- > Isolation training
- > Play biting
- > Preventing food and resource guarding
- > Solving problem behaviors
- > Expectations and consistency
- > Chewing

A note on exploration: The goal of this portion of the class is to expose the puppies to novel environments, people, objects, surfaces and sounds in a positive manner. Use treats in abundance, work at the puppy's comfort level, and guide owners on reading their dog's body language. In order for socialization to be beneficial, it must be fun and enjoyable for the puppy.

A note on pass the puppy: The goal of this portion of the class is for the puppies to be handled by other participants in the class, though the instructor should step in if a puppy is overly afraid or not taking treats. It is the puppy's choice to perform this exercise.



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