

SOCIALIZING FIDO by Pat Renshaw (first published in the 1997 Dogs Annual)

I can think of nothing that elicits more delight than a puppy! They are the epitome of innocence. They come to us with a clean slate, as it were, because of minimal social experience in their breeder environment. Then, at about the tender age of seven to ten weeks, the puppy is plucked from everything that is familiar, plunked down in an entirely alien environment and is expected to interact - happily - with total strangers. A tall order for a puppy. The fact that most puppies handle this upheaval with minimal stress, says volumes for the sense and sensibility of dogs!

Dogs that handle this well have been raised, to that point, in an ideal 'starter' environment. What is the ideal starter environment? I believe that a puppy, who is the product of a mentally stable dam, that is raised in the house (preferably the kitchen) and is handled *a lot* by the humans residing there, has the best chance of handling the stress of what's to come.

Why the kitchen? Why not a bedroom, the basement or the kennel building? The kitchen, being the hub of most households, is the noisiest, busiest, and the most stimulating to the senses. The puppies are going to experience a myriad of sounds, scents, visuals and, probably most important, touch. Consider your own household for a moment. The dishwasher whooshing away, the banging of pots and pans, all the miscellaneous stuff rattling away in the bottom drawer of the oven every time you open it looking for those muffin tins, the smell of coffee first thing in the morning and the blare of the radio and TV. The kitchen, being the busiest room of the house has more traffic than the Trans-Canada. How could *anyone* resist bending down and scooping up a puppy, or two, who run to greet you as soon as you enter the room? No-one that I know!

Another ideal reason for raising puppies in the kitchen; it will be kept absolutely pristine! In a perfect world this, in turn, teaches the puppies to be clean. Most puppies I know that leave their breeder home are, at the very least, paper trained. And, this is due simply to them being in a constantly clean environment.

Now, it's one thing for the puppy to be exposed to stimuli for the senses. What about 'canine' socialization? That's where a mentally stable dam comes in. She should relish the company when members of the household enter the room. If she's elated to see people, the puppies will follow suit. Dogs, being non-verbal communicators, take their cues from those around them and especially puppies. If the bitch is not bothered by the sights and sounds of the household, she will not elicit a sense of foreboding in the puppies. Therefore, it follows, that after the initial 'shock' of experiencing something for the first time (loud noise, quick movement, etc), the puppy will relax once he realizes no-one else is reacting - especially Mom. The more his senses are exposed to the stimuli, the more he learns to take it in stride.

There is a lot of socializing going on within the litter. This is critical to the mental health of *your* puppy. There are the dominant puppies; the middle-of-the-road puppies and the submissive puppies. The dominant puppy wants the toy and he simply takes it. If the possessive puppy objects and the other puppy is more dominant, the possessive puppy learns to submit to the more dominant character. The submissive puppy learns to 'read' what's going on within the litter and acts accordingly (doesn't push to be first to the feed dish or the front of the gang when the human with the loving touch arrives, etc). The middle-of-the-road puppy also learns to read the action and learns to act accordingly. Much of this non-verbal communication is missed by the human element or misinterpreted.

What happens then, at that tender age referred to earlier when the puppy is set down in an alien environment. Simple; the new owner takes over! It's their responsibility to **continue** the puppies education in social skills. How do we do this?

It's been proven that puppies are capable of learning very intricate lessons at a very young age. They are - remember - a 'clean slate'. Fill it in! with things that **YOU** want the puppy to know. Mold him into the **dog** that you envision. Puppy kindergarten classes have become extremely popular mainly due to the fact that if puppies are capable of learning basic manners early, why wait?

Let's get down to brass tacks. When you take your puppy home, what is your responsibility? How can you ensure

that your puppy is properly socialized?

The easiest place to keep clean is the kitchen and that's probably where your puppy will spend a goodly amount of time when he is initially introduced to your home. This is good. This is the busiest and noisiest room in the house. However, don't isolate him from the other rooms. Have him in your midst; among the comings and goings. Let him experience everything (the sound of the dishwasher, the vacuum, doors slamming, kids squealing, quick and abrupt movements - *everything*). Teach him what toys he is allowed to have (not what toys are his - nothing is HIS - it's yours and you are allowing him to play with them). Reprimand him gently, for indiscretions and show him the appropriate behaviour you would prefer. (Be sure that your reprimands fit the crime. Punitive measures are seldom necessary when teaching a puppy appropriate behaviour patterns.) Don't allow your puppy to become kinetic when he sees food. Don't allow him to be possessive around food or toys. Take things from your puppy frequently, praise him and then give it back, praising him again. He may think that you've taken leave of your senses, but he'll also come to realize that you will take things from him when you wish to and he learns that he WILL relinquish them when told to do so. Handle your puppy's feet, toes, ears, mouth; this accustoms the puppy to being 'man-handled' and he learns to tolerate this bizarre behaviour from humans (usually groomers, veterinarians and children). *Always* praise the puppy profusely when he acts appropriately and he is likely to repeat the behaviour that elicits the praise. This makes him happy and it certainly makes you happy!

Don't ignore the wide open spaces. Outdoors can be very frightening to a puppy. When you bring your puppy home, it will be one of the few car rides he's had. He probably hasn't experienced a collar and leash at this tender time of his life. He hasn't seen or heard cars, trucks or buses whizzing by on the roadway. He hasn't experienced a sidewalk, a park, kids on bicycles or roller blades, strange dogs, strange people. Introduce him to these things steadily but gradually.

If you live in the city, no problem. All these sights and sounds are at your doorstep. Sit on the front lawn with your puppy, on lead, and play with him. When he reacts to something in a startled fashion, he'll look to you for reassurance. Reassure him with comments such as; "What's that?! Whoooo. Neat, eh?", and divert his attention to something else. If you are walking with him and he reacts with something akin to panic (thrashing at the end of the lead with some screaming thrown in to make your blood run cold!), calm him, tell him not to be so silly, and move on. **DO NOT**, under any circumstances, coddle him. Do not tell him, "It's okay. There, there. It's okay. Let's go. It's okay." He will assume that the behaviour that he is exhibiting at that very moment is "okay", because you keep saying it is. And you keep saying this in a soothing, whiny voice, so he continues the behaviour and you continue telling him it's okay. Far better to just tell him, in a matter-of-fact tone that; "It's okay. Don't be dopey. Let's go. Good boy," and move on. As the puppy moves on with you, praise profusely. He will also repeat **this** behaviour, because it made you happy. The cue you gave him was one of unconcern, therefore it follows that he shouldn't be concerned either.

Introduce your puppy to as many people as you can; gentle children of all types and sizes, older people, ethnic people. Dogs may see in black, white and gray, but they definitely know the difference between toddlers, children, adults, older folks and people of ethnic backgrounds other than the family they live with. Expose your puppy to all of this. The best place is the park. What child can resist a puppy? What oldster, who remembers all the dogs that have gone before, can resist the appeal of a puppy?

In a safe environment, introduce your puppy to as many dogs as you can. I've known dogs who were frightened of black dogs or small dogs or certain breeds of dog. With dogs that you know you can trust, let your puppy play. Let his 'canine posturing' education continue. Don't isolate him from his canine world.

If you live in a rural area, you'll have to make more of an effort to socialize your puppy. You will have to pack him into the car and take him to malls, to town for short walks and to parks to romp and play. For your puppy's well-being, do this. Invite lots of kids over to play with the puppy. Allow him to experience and see all those things his sophisticated city cousins would experience and see. He comes with the same clean slate for you to fill in and, although it may become taxing on your leisure time for a short while it is, I guarantee, time well spent bonding and getting to know your new family member. And it will go miles in ensuring that he is a stable, and *welcome*, member of your community.

Your responsibility as your puppy's guardian is to make sure that he grows into a well-adjusted, well-mannered adult dog. You do that by not compromising your expectations and by treating your puppy *like the dog you'd like him to be!* He learns to adjust to you - not vis versa.

If you introduce an older puppy or dog into your household, the same holds true. You may need to exhibit more patience because the dog may have had some adverse experiences that you don't understand. Be gentle. Be firm. Be fair. Teach the dog appropriate behaviours to take the place of the behaviours you'd like to eradicate. Seek help from qualified trainers who can help you to 'read' your dog and understand what motivates him. It will take time, but with love and understanding you can, and will, be successful.

SIDEBAR #1

PUPPY CLASSES/OBEDIENCE SCHOOLS

The best thing that you can do for you and your puppy is to investigate obedience schools in your area that offer puppy socialization classes. Most obedience schools won't take puppies prior to their second vaccination so make arrangements early. This will give you the opportunity to visit the school, sit in on a class or two and see how it operates.

How many puppies are enrolled in each class? Are the instructors knowledgeable? Is there a lot of play sessions going on? Are the instructors gentle with the puppies? Do the human team-members get a lot of individual attention? Are questions encouraged? Is the whole family involved in the class? Is it fun!?

In socialization classes, puppies are encouraged to interact during play sessions. This accustoms puppies to other breeds and other canine personalities. As children are generally encouraged to attend puppy classes with their families, your puppy is exposed to children other than those in your immediate circle.

In puppy socialization classes, puppies learn, among other things, to have their feet handled, their ears examined, their lips lifted to have their teeth checked. This is done by their owner and then, during "pass the puppy", by someone else in the class; someone the puppy is not familiar with.

Owners are helped in the basics; learning what motivates their puppy, learning how to teach a puppy sit/down/stand/stay on command; learning how to teach a puppy to walk on lead in a controlled fashion.

Puppy socialization classes usually run one hour, once a week, for about six weeks. Consider this most important part of your puppy's education Montessori for dogs. This is where your puppy is going to learn to learn. This is where your puppy is going to learn that **you** are a lot of fun and that he's the luckiest dog alive to have picked YOU to be his lifetime hero.

SIDEBAR #2

THE BENEFITS OF CRATES

More and more puppy owners are understanding the benefits of a crate; how it makes their life with a new puppy so much easier.

More and more dog owners are coming to understand that the **dog** comes to see the crate as his 'den'; his own personal space where he can go when he wants to crash or remove himself from the hustle and bustle of the household.

Your dog will, at some point in his life, have to make an overnight visit to the veterinarian. A dog who is crate trained will handle this sometimes stressful situation much better than a dog that has never been crated.

When you have to be away from the house and leave the puppy to his own devices, he **cannot** get in any trouble in his crate. He cannot chew furniture, electric cords or your new drapes. For the puppy, it is the one safe place he can be when you are not able to supervise him.

How do you go about crate training? Simple. Follow these steps and you'll have a puppy who pops into his crate anytime!

Set the crate up in the area that your puppy will inhabit when he first comes home. Put a blanket in it if you wish and when you feed the puppy, put the food bowl in the crate. He may look on this as alien, so set it in the front of the crate so he just has to lean in and eat. Each time, move it a few inches further back until he's actually **in** the crate when eating.

When you tidy up his toys, store them in his crate. Leave the door open and when he wants a toy, he'll go to the crate to choose one.

Once he's comfortable moving in and out of the crate, set him in there with a cookie or something else that he sees as special and close the door. Be prepared - he'll fuss. Just tell him to shush. If he continues, firmly chastise him (verbally). Keep short and pointed. Once he's quiet for a **nano-second**, praise him profusely, open the door and let him out. Do this several times a day and leave him in the crate longer each time before releasing him.

Guaranteed - *if* you follow these simple guidelines - your puppy will be crate trained within the week. Keep your puppy/dog safe - use a crate.