



PUPPY WELLNESS

Are Early Socialisation and Infectious Diseases Prevention Incompatible?

What is Puppy Wellness?

Wellness is more than simply freedom from disease, it is an overall state of physical and mental wellbeing. Puppy wellness depends on many factors, including genetics, nutrition, protection from parasites and infectious diseases, grooming, intellectual stimulation, exercise, socialisation and a loving and safe environment.

When a puppy is both physically AND behaviourally well, he is more likely to meet the expectations of his human family and is at decreased risk of re-homing or euthanasia.

One of the dilemmas in the pursuit of puppy wellness is balancing the need for early socialisation with the need for protection from infectious disease. Traditionally, the puppy owner has been advised to restrict the puppy to the house and the yard, until completion of his vaccination series, in order to protect him from infectious diseases until he is well immunised, which can mean virtual isolation from the outside world until over 4 months of age. However, the window of opportunity to most effectively socialise a puppy usually closes before the puppy is fully vaccinated, and delaying vital socialisation often has negative long-term behavioural consequences. Research shows the lack of early socialisation increases the likelihood of behaviour problems such as fear and aggression.

But is the degree of precaution still necessary?

This "traditional" approach is based in part on the limitations of older vaccines, which are no longer in use. Canine vaccines have improved significantly in the last 15 years, as has our understanding of the importance of early socialisation. Let us, then re-examine traditional recommendations in the light of modern advances in vaccinology and insight into canine behavioural development.

The value of early socialisation

Mother Nature designed dogs to be especially receptive to interactions with novel people, dogs, places and to new experiences, while very young, so that they grow up to be comfortable with everyday elements of their environment. This prevents them from wasting energy by responding fearfully to the common events and encounters of their day to day life. Puppies are programmed to be most accepting of new experiences until the age of about 12 weeks. Mother Nature decrees that anything the puppy hasn't encountered by 12 weeks old is odd enough to warrant caution! The period from 3 to approximately 12 weeks old is called the "sensitive period", whereby puppies are most able to easily acclimatise to novel stimuli.

From 12 to 18 weeks old the window of opportunity to socialise the puppy closes rapidly – such that with each passing week it becomes increasingly difficult to successfully socialise a dog. Once the dog reaches 18 weeks of age the window of socialisation closes, and it is then much harder and sometimes impossible to train a dog to like something new, or acclimatise him to something that he finds frightening. Poorly socialised dogs are at much greater risk of behaving fearfully or aggressively with unfamiliar people, dogs, and in novel situations.

Socialisation is a big project – it requires exposure to people, dogs, other pets, places, sounds and the types of experiences the dog will be subjected to in the life he shares with us. Depending on the owner's lifestyle, this might include trains, garbage trucks, schoolyards



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of screaming children, crowds, cats, crying infants, and much more. Most puppies will be expected to be comfortable with a wide variety of people, handling for routine grooming, and the wide array of noises both in our homes and outside in the greater community, in their day to day life with us. While it is impossible to expose a young puppy to absolutely everything he will encounter in life, the more bases that are covered while the window of socialisation is open, the greater the chance that the puppy will be able to generalise from his prior experiences and find something reassuringly familiar in a new situation. A great way to promote socialisation is through “puppy classes”.

Puppy Classes

Puppy classes – the brainchild of Dr. Ian Dunbar – were developed as a way of enabling puppy socialisation and training in a friendly and safe environment. In a typical puppy class off-leash play and play-fighting helps socialise puppies to other dogs and allows them to learn to be gentle with their jaws, handling exercises acclimatise them to being touched by strangers, and exposure to odd sights and sounds, accustoms them to a wide range of life experiences. Between socialisation activities, topics such as housetraining, exercise and environmental stimulation, are addressed with owners, and the puppies are taught some basic obedience skills.

Puppy classes help puppies achieve wellness by facilitating socialisation and by teaching the puppies' guardians how to assist the puppies in acquiring skills that are expected of them in order for them to be cherished members of their human family and of society. Since puppy classes are so important to the lifelong wellbeing of puppies, it is crucial that as many puppies as possible attend them. Despite this, many owners are discouraged from enrolling their dog because of recommendations from breeders or veterinarians who argue that puppies should not be exposed to other dogs until their full vaccination schedule is complete, something that doesn't occur until after the puppy is 12 weeks old, when his peak socialisation period has already passed.

Puppy owners, faced with balancing the risk of their puppy becoming physically ill as a result of attending class, against what they may perceive as nebulous social benefits of attendance, cannot be blamed for choosing to keep their puppies at home. Yet with the advent of classes designed specifically for puppies who have not completed their vaccine series – where safety and sanitation are given great consideration – and the marked improvements in canine vaccines, the relative risks have changed. Although vaccination does not guarantee protection from disease, newer vaccines allow more reliable protection at a younger age.



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Vaccines and how they work

The diseases against which a puppy is vaccinated depends on the environment that he lives in, his lifestyle, and his health status. Puppies in Australia are generally vaccinated against 4 infectious diseases: distemper, hepatitis (adenovirus), parvovirus, and kennel cough (bordatella bronchiseptica and parainfluenza). Of the diseases vaccinated for, the one that is usually of greatest concern when considering puppy socialisation is parvovirus. The reason for this is threefold: the virus is incredibly resilient in the environment, the disease is severe, and older vaccines were not very reliable at providing reliable protection in young puppies.

How vaccines & vaccination schedules have changed

The windows of vulnerability used to pose a huge problem with regards to parvovirus in puppies. In recent years these windows have become much smaller, and therefore less problematic, because the newer vaccines are much better at stimulating the immune system even while the puppy still has maternal antibodies in his system. These newer vaccines are called "high-titer, low-passage" vaccines because the disease substance used in making the vaccine is put through fewer "passages" to weaken it and, therefore, the vaccine product is capable of stimulating the immune system better, resulting in more antibodies being made (measured as a "titer"). Even the breeds that have historically been more susceptible to parvovirus, such as the black-and-tan-coated breeds, don't seem to be at increased risk anymore when the newer, "stronger" vaccines are used.

With an accelerated schedule (starting at 6 rather than 8 weeks of age) using the newer vaccines (high-titer, low-passage), puppies can now be effectively vaccinated at an earlier age. While this should have paved the road to getting puppies into socialisation classes while the window of socialisation is still wide open, there is still great hesitation in the veterinary, breeder, and training community to encourage the attendance of puppies under 12 weeks of age in these classes.

Expert opinion on the relative-risk dilemma

While it has long been recognised that behavioural illness kills more dogs than infectious disease, the first veterinary expert to promote getting puppies into socialisation classes after a minimum of one vaccination was Dr. R.K. Anderson, a veterinarian, board certified in both population medicine and behaviour. In an open letter to his colleagues titled "Puppy Vaccination and Socialisation should go together" (available at www.abrionline.org) he emphasises that we have a responsibility to enable early learning and socialisation in young puppies, and that they should be enrolled in a socialisation program as a key part of any preventive medicine program.

Dr. Anderson recommends that puppies start puppy class at 8 to 9 weeks of age, with a minimum of one vaccination. He further argues that: "Experience and epidemiologic data support the relative safety and lack of transmission of disease in these puppy socialisation classes over the past ten years in many parts of the United States. In fact; the risk of a dog dying because of infection with distemper or parvovirus disease is far less than the much higher risk of a dog dying (euthanasia) because of a behaviour problem."

Dr. Anderson concludes by stating that 10 years of good experience and data with few exceptions allows veterinarians to generally recommend early socialisation and training classes, beginning when puppies are 8 to 9 weeks of age.



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Groundbreaking veterinary behaviourist position statement on puppy socialisation

While it has been historically difficult for veterinarians to recommend classes for young pups when doing so carries some degree of risk – especially when the veterinary community as a whole had not come to any sort of collective agreement on whether the benefits outweigh the potential for harm – the progressive realisation that by keeping pups out of class until they are fully vaccinated we were winning the battle only to lose the war has finally culminated in the superb groundbreaking position statement issued by the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behaviour, from which is quoted the following:

“In general, puppies can start puppy socialisation classes as early as 7-8 weeks of age. Puppies should receive a minimum of one set of vaccines at least 7 days prior to the first class and a first deworming. They should be kept up to date on vaccines throughout the class.””the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behaviour believes that it should be the standard of care for puppies to receive such socialisation before they are fully vaccinated.” (full statement www.avsabonline.com).

Socialisation and disease prevention work hand in hand towards wellness

There is a growing consensus that puppies are NOT getting ill in puppy classes that enrol puppies who are 7 weeks and older, and who have been vaccinated at least 7 to 10 days before starting class. However, this is not to suggest that young puppies should be exposed indiscriminately to other dogs and outdoor areas. It is still prudent to avoid exposing a puppy to dogs of unknown health status, or to parks and other areas likely contaminated with dog faeces, until the puppy is fully vaccinated. In regions where parvovirus is rampant, or where other infectious disease agents may be present, it may even be warranted to keep the puppy from walking on public property until fully vaccinated. Keep in mind that socialisation to dogs is but one aspect of socialisation, and that puppies can be safely exposed to people, places, sight, smells and sounds without significant risk of exposure to infectious disease.



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- Drive to a busy mall and hang out with your pup on a mat at the entrance. Strangers will flock to you, manhandle your pup, and willingly feed him treats.
- Host a puppy party: invite friends and family over, play some music, toss some streamers, and pass your pup around
- Bring your puppy to indoor Scouts or Brownies meetings. Supervise children interacting with him.
- Play sound desensitisation CDs or cassettes. A whole range of everyday noises such as sounds of motorcycles, stormy weather, and crying infants are available. Feed lots of treats for scary noises.
- Carry your pup through a busy mall (until the security guard asks you to leave).
- Park yourself with your puppy at an outdoor café along a busy street. The puppy can rest on a pillow/bed at your feet. Allow strangers to pet your dog, and offer him biscuits.
- Take drives to different parts of town and country with your pup safely seatbelted in the back seat. Visit countryside, different neighbourhoods with people of various ethnicities, and go through the car wash and some drive thrus. Have the window open so that he can take in all of the sights and sounds and smells (car wash excepted!).
- Take your puppy for long strolls tethered in a wagon, stroller, or body sling (depending on size/weight!).

Puppyhood remains the single greatest opportunity to positively influence a dog's behavioural development. Since more dogs are euthanased for behavioural reasons than for all medical causes combined, it would be unwise to allow unfounded fear of exposure to infectious disease to interfere with efforts towards early socialisation.

Advising puppy owners to wait until the puppy is over 12 weeks of age before exposing him to the world he will be living in might have been appropriate a decade ago but is now quite clearly outdated. In striving towards puppy wellness, socialisation and infectious disease prevention must go hand in hand.

This article is to provide general information on the of vaccination of puppies, socialisation of puppies, and th relative risks of behavioural illness and infectious disease when puppies are exposed to other dogs before the completion of their vaccination series. The information contained within is not intended as veterinary recommendations, and should not replace the advice of your veterinarian

http://www.feedbagpetsupply.com/PDFs/Puppy_Socialization_vs_Immunizations.pdf

Striving for Puppy Wellness. Are Early Socialisation and Infectious Diseases Prevention Incompatible?

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Note: This article first appeared in (USA) Association for Pet Dog Trainers' Chronicle of the Dog in September 2006. The article has been brought up to date, and the content modified slightly, for use as conference notes at the 2008 Association for Pet Dog Trainers of Australia.

