

Providing Puppy Socialization in Tandem With Inoculations

There has long been a conflict across the canine medical and behavioral communities. While medical practitioners focus on immunizing puppies against viruses such as parvo and distemper, behavioral practitioners are concerned with the sensitive socialization periods of a puppy's developmental timeline. The latter concern has long taken a back seat to the former. Yet, each year, millions of euthanasias are performed in our shelters due to canine behavior problems, and for this there is no inoculation. Puppy socialization is the only prescription.

A Puppy's Developmental Timeline

The first five weeks of a puppy's life are dominated by his relationships with his mother and his littermates. This is the beginning of his education in playing appropriately with other dogs.

The window for puppy socialization with people is open from 6 until 12 weeks of age. In this time, puppies must be exposed to all kinds of people – male and female, young and old, tall and short, with different skin colors, with facial hair, with a crazy hat or sunglasses, on a skateboard or bike, in uniform, in a wheelchair or with a cane – anyone you can think of. As your puppy gets older, his openness and tolerance to new people and experiences will diminish, and he is more likely to greet them with trepidation, fear, or even defensive aggression, if he has not had the proper exposure.

Somewhere between the ages of 13 and 16 weeks, a puppy's socialization window will close. This means that, before this time, it is absolutely critical that the puppy has had good play experiences with many different puppies and dogs with whom he is not related. Certain breeds of dogs are rougher players than others, and if, until this point, a puppy has only had experiences playing with his own littermates, he will not be sensitive and respectful of the body language and signals of others. In this time, he also needs to learn bite inhibition so that throughout his life, whether in play or in the middle of a scuffle, his bite will cause no damage.

The Facts About Puppy Vaccinations

Inattention to these sensitive periods of a puppy's development can result in an adult dog with issues around people and other dogs and, consequently, who has severe behavior problems. Unfortunately, until very recently, this has been in direct conflict with the medical concern of keeping puppies safe from exposure to viruses until they are fully vaccinated.

A puppy's immunity to diseases is drawn from several sources:

- A vaccinated bitch will provide her puppies with their first dose of immunoglobulin.
- Vaccination can begin as early as six weeks and then occur every three to four weeks for three to four doses until 14 to 16 weeks.
- In fact, the mother's immunoglobulin could actually interfere with the active immunity of the inoculation, so it's not clear exactly how much active immunity a puppy is carrying at any given time.

Depending on the health, robustness, and breed of a puppy who has already begun his vaccination regimen, natural exposure to a small dose of a virus may actually boost his immunity. This means that the risk to small exposures that may accompany your puppy's attending a puppy class may in fact benefit his immunity.

Many training facilities offer puppy kindergarten classes for puppies starting at 8 weeks of age and require that they've had age-appropriate vaccinations in order to attend. Besides affording the opportunity for off-leash play, the puppies have the advantage of learning how to learn very early on in their education.

In addition, many vets are providing puppy play groups for client puppies who are not fully vaccinated. In these sessions, the puppies have the opportunity to socialize with the other puppies in off-leash play and be handled by a variety of people.

Next Steps for You and Your Puppy

The moral of the story is socialize, socialize, socialize!

Find a reputable training facility that offers puppy play groups or classes for puppies in the midst of their vaccination regimen.

When registering, you should be asked about your puppy's vaccination schedule. Make sure to ask whether off-leash play is a component of the class – it is one of the most important skills your dog will ever learn.

Have discussions with your vet about assuring proper puppy socialization in the context of safe exposures. While the dog run and the city streets are too risky an environment for a partially immunized puppy, there are other safer forums: friends' dogs, pet stores, other places where people and dogs congregate. Make sure to ask if the other dog is up-to-date on his vaccinations and whether he plays nicely with puppies.

Introduce your puppy to many people, puppies, and dogs, ensuring that these interactions will be safe, happy, unthreatening ones.

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Laura Garber & her dog Trista



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