

Selling Early Socialization

By **Terry Long**

FIRST PLACE WINNER



Elaine and Mark Dowell put a lot of thought into adopting their new puppy. They researched a variety of breeds, talking to breeders and owners of dogs they thought would fit their family’s lifestyle. They visited shelters and talked to adoptions counselors. They planned the arrival of the new pup for when at least one of them would have more time to devote to housetraining, and they hired a pet sitter to come by at noon every day so the pup wouldn’t be alone for more

than a few hours at a time. They bought a couple of baby gates, a crate, a variety of toys, and arranged their first visit with the veterinarian who had provided their previous dogs with loving care in the final days of their lives. Elaine and Mark looked forward to getting off on the right foot.

Finally, they made their choice and brought home from a private rescue organization a six-week-old puppy. She was adorable, looking like a white German shepherd and yellow Labrador retriever mix, and they named her Callie. She passed their vet’s health exam with flying colors. Although looking forward to taking Callie out for walks, the Dowell’s followed their vet’s admonition not to take Callie anywhere until she was at least four months of age, when all her vaccinations would be complete. Elaine and Mark settled for introducing Callie to the friends and family members who visited on occasion.

“But my vet said ...”

When they hired a trainer to start private training sessions, the Dowell’s were surprised when the trainer recommended early socialization. This was in direct contradiction to what their veterinarian had told them. The trainer said that it was imperative that they expose their pup to a variety of people and animals before the tender age of twelve weeks. The trainer felt this was especially important because of the high percentage of German shepherd she suspected comprised Callie’s genetic heritage. In the trainer’s opinion, German shepherds needed more than the average amount of socialization. The Dowell’s listened intently, asking questions, considering that socialization might not mean

unnecessarily exposing Callie to contagious diseases. After the trainer left, they talked to their vet again who adamantly insisted that Callie remain restricted to the house. Mark and Elaine chose to follow their veterinarian's advice.

Callie developed into a striking dog. She would eventually reach 70 pounds and the size and shape of a German shepherd. She was a bit on the timid side, backing away from visitors, and avoiding people and dogs on their walks and in the new group obedience class they joined. At about nine months of age, after being chased by a child trying to catch her off-leash dog, Callie began displaying aggression toward people and dogs. Her aggression toward dogs included growling, lunging, and barking even when a dog was over 200' away. The Dowell's were dismayed to discover that their once timid Callie now required expensive and time-consuming behavior modification. How did this happen, they wondered? Didn't they do everything right?

The Conundrum

Many dog owners like the Dowell's struggle to sort out conflicting information they receive from pet care professionals. It is very common for veterinarians to insist that dogs not leave their homes until close to four months of age. From a vet's perspective, this makes eminent sense. They want to avoid exposure to contagious viruses such as distemper and parvo. Vets spend four years (or longer) in vet school focusing on the treatment of medical problems. If they are lucky, they have a semester course on animal behavior. Trainers and behaviorists, on the other hand, want to avoid many of the behavior problems they see in *their* practices. Their education focuses on understanding the impact of canine critical developmental stages, learning theory, and how to best prepare a dog to meet life's psychological challenges through early training and socialization. With such diametrically opposed perspectives, it is easy to see why dog owners are torn between following their veterinarian's advice and their trainer's advice. Many trainers are reluctant to press their clients to ignore their veterinarian's advice. So, what can trainers do to help dogs get adequate socialization? There are a number of strategies that work.

Working with Veterinarians

First, remember that veterinarians receive very little education about dealing with behavior problems unless they pursue advanced course work and become a board-certified veterinary behaviorist. As a result, they are most concerned with keeping puppies from contracting deadly viruses. They are unlikely to radically change their advice simply because trainers point out potential behavior problems. Instead, they need to be convinced that protecting puppies

from exposure to viruses can be accomplished—through careful planning—at the same time as a sound socialization program. The following strategies focus on starting a dialogue with veterinarians.

1. **Letter from a colleague**—Dr. R. K. Anderson, the co-inventor of the Gentle Leader head collar, is the author of an open letter to veterinarians about the importance of early socialization. It can be downloaded from the “files section” of the APDT web site (apdt.com), and distributed to your local vets, along with your business card and class schedule.
2. **Fact Sheet**—Create a one-page Socialization Fact Sheet that outlines the results of the study conducted by Scott & Fuller, as well as citations from more recent books. Veterinarians value strong evidence before changing protocols. Presenting them with solid information from board-certified veterinary behaviorists and applied animal behaviorists may help them consider alternatives to keeping puppies at home during the critical socialization period (i.e., 3 – 12 weeks of age). In the Socialization Fact Sheet be sure to address how to protect puppies from high-risk situations (dog parks and other places frequented by unknown dogs), while still providing adequate socialization (puppy parties, controlled access to vaccinated dogs, etc.).
3. **In-service programs**—Offer to provide complimentary “in-service” educational programs for veterinary staff. Many veterinary clinics hold routine educational meetings for their staff. Offer to provide a brief presentation on a variety of subjects, including socialization. Many veterinarians still recommend outdated practices such as the alpha roll correction, “dominance exercises” (forcing a dog to stay on its back until it “submits”), etc. Providing brief educational forums can help them choose to remove this kind of advice from their client education, as well as understand the importance of early socialization.
4. **Complimentary or discounted training**—Invite veterinary staff to group classes, with or without their dogs. This will expose them to the benefits of early socialization and training.
5. **Socialization Chart**—Provide a one-page document that lists a variety of things puppies should be exposed to (children, adults, dogs, cats, motorcycles, skateboards, etc.). List these on the left side of the page and along the top of the page, running left to right, list the weeks, i.e., 7

through 12 weeks (and beyond!). This chart can be handed out to their clients, along with the Socialization Fact Sheet described above.

6. **Protocol for Pup's Veterinary Exams**—Provide information about how a puppy's first veterinary visits can be made more of a positive experience. Dr. Lore Haug (College Station, TX) wrote an excellent article on this topic in the *APDT Newsletter* (May/June 2000). Veterinarians may also contact Dr. Rolan Tripp (La Mirada, CA), a veterinarian with a special interest in behavior, for information about how to establish clinic protocols that optimize a puppy's early experiences.
7. **Veterinary-sponsored Puppy Parties**—Offer to hold puppy parties/classes at your veterinarian's clinic. This can provide a location that veterinarians are more comfortable with for young puppies, and can also have the beneficial value of providing the veterinarian a "value-added" service for his/her clientele.

Community Outreach

The following strategies focus on public education.

1. **Shelter education**—Training demonstrations can be offered at many local shelters, giving trainers the opportunity to educate the public, as well as shelter volunteers/staff, about the importance of early socialization.
2. **Public demonstrations/fund raisers**—Many trainers are asked to participate in fundraisers for non-profit organizations. This is a great opportunity to provide live training demonstrations, while also getting out the word about early socialization.
3. **Community Forums**—Develop a community outreach program that hosts a monthly forum for dog owners. Such a program can be held at varying locations in your community. For example, you can rotate the location from between several veterinary clinics, groomers, doggy daycare centers, pet stores, etc. Each forum can focus on a different topic, but would always include getting the word out about early socialization. The Socialization Fact Sheet described above can be used as a handout at such forums. Often, local newspapers will announce your event for free since it is a community service.

4. **Affiliations**—Contact groomers, doggy daycare centers, pet stores, and other affiliated dog services about providing your Socialization Fact Sheet to their clientele. Most would be happy to provide free information to their clients.

Puppy Parties

As a trainer, there are a number of strategies you can implement that will have a direct impact on providing opportunities for early socialization.

1. **Puppy Classes and Parties**—If you do not offer group classes yourself, find out who does and check them out. Many trainers will take puppies who have received at least one or two vaccinations, and many report that they have never had problems with parvo or distemper in their years of offering these classes. Refer your clients to classes that allow (even encourage!) interaction between puppies. Many classes not only do not allow this, but actively prevent puppies from interacting. As many trainers know, this can lead to fearfulness, frustration, and/or dog-dog aggression over time. Make sure that the trainers who run the class know how to appropriately match puppies for play time, not allowing puppies to bully or be bullied.
2. **Puppy Roundups**—If there are no good puppy classes in your area, consider creating an e-mail list for your puppy clients so that they can contact each other about getting their puppies together with each other. You can provide protocols to follow and leave it up to your clients to contact each other about getting together. (You may want to include a liability waiver as part of your written protocols.)
3. **Controlled Exposure Protocols**—Part of the Socialization Fact Sheet described above should include brief examples about how to expose puppies for socialization without risking disease. However, a separate, more detailed one-page document should be developed for your clientele. This handout would reference the scientific support for early socialization, but should also go into step-by-step detail about how to implement a safe socialization program. This would include the dos and don'ts. For example, for people who are very afraid of taking their puppies to public parks or other locations, the protocol can direct them to take a mat, exercise pen, hand cleaner, etc., to different locations and allow people to pet their puppies after washing their hands and to allow people to bring

their dogs up to the pen while the owner provides tasty treats to their pup. It may seem overly conservative to some, but for others, it may give them just the safeguards and peace of mind they need to move forward with a socialization program.

Conclusion

Trainers have a challenging occupation. We delight when we get calls from owners when their puppies are a few weeks old instead of several months or years old and have developed learned behaviors that are difficult to undo. How frustrating it is, then, to get to owners and puppies early only to find that others have told them not to start early socialization. Fortunately for the Dowell's, they worked with a competent trainer who helped them implement a desensitization/counterconditioning program to overcome Callie's fears. Now at age three, Callie, for the most part, can be trusted not to lunge on leash and even plays with some dogs off leash. The Dowell's learned the value of early socialization the hard way. By implementing a broad-based educational program as outlined above, trainers can help change the tide and ensure that puppies have a strong foundation that will serve them for life.