

Prevention of behavioural problems in dogs and cats

Dogs, just like children, go through clearly defined stages of development. During each of these stages, puppies need to undergo specific experiences in order to be able to develop normally. Stress or psychological trauma can, on the other hand, have long-lasting negative effects. Knowing this enables us to make full use of the opportunities offered during each stage in order to rear a pet that will fit in and feel comfortable in our society. It also enables us to prevent behavioural problems which all too often result in animals being given away or even put to sleep. This article is divided into two parts. The first part explains what we know about the development of puppies. The second part gives practical information on attitudes to adopt, training techniques and the prevention of behavioural problems.

A stimulating environment is needed for a puppy's nervous system to develop normally. Mild stress (such as stroking or being temporarily exposed to low temperatures) during the first few days after birth helps dogs to develop a well-balanced temperament and to cope with stress better in the future. It also makes puppies more receptive to learning and training.

Dogs go through sensitive periods during which they must undergo specific experiences in order to adapt to the human environment. During foetal development, hormonal influences determine whether the animal will adopt male or female behaviour later on in life. Even taste preferences can develop at this early stage.

Puppies are born deaf and blind, although they already have a well-developed sense of balance, taste, smell and touch. They seek contact and try and find the temperature that is best suited to them. They depend on their mother to maintain their body temperature. Their mother also needs to lick them in order to teach them to pass urine and faeces. Puppies should be touched on a daily basis from birth onwards, as this encourages their development and makes it easier for them to be socialised later on.

Puppies go through a transitional phase during which their senses develop, their eyes and ears open and they learn to pass urine and faeces on their own. They begin to be able to stand up and walk and also start eating solid food.

Socialisation is a key stage in a puppy's development. To start off with, it is particularly important for puppies to be brought into contact with other dogs so that the young dogs learn manners (bite inhibition!) and communication techniques specific to dogs. Puppies should then be introduced to a wide range of different people (especially children!) as well as animals from other species. This is another period of development during which it is essential to have a rich environment in order to allow dogs' senses and reactivity to develop normally and to prevent animals from becoming anxious.

During the socialisation stage, there is a time (or times) during which the young dog becomes a lot more fearful and learns all too easily from any bad experiences. During this period, a puppy can be damaged for life by incorrect treatment. Transporting an animal during this period can also be very harmful to a young dog.

Youth is a period marked by rapid growth, intense activity and increased independence or self-sufficiency. Dogs reach sexual maturity early, between the ages of ½ to 1 ½ years. Behavioural development continues during a dog's adolescence until it reaches social maturity several years later.

Practical conclusions can be drawn from the above-mentioned points. A rich environment and extensive social contacts are important for normal development right from the beginning of a puppy's life. A young dog will get used to procedures such as having its nails cut, being given medicine, keeping still etc. if these experiences are organised in a pleasant way, for instance by giving the puppy treats. Puppies should be carefully and systematically exposed to environmental stimuli that could otherwise cause them anxiety in the future. Puppies must be reared to be house-trained in a professional manner and without being punished. Young dogs need to be allowed to play with other puppies and with people. Through play, puppies should learn not to bite. If a puppy becomes too rough, you should suddenly stop playing with it and completely ignore it for a while, just like other puppies do. It is also vital for puppies and kittens to learn through play how to communicate with other young animals of their own species and how to interpret human behaviour correctly.

Puppies should learn to walk on a lead and not to jump up at people. They should also learn to leave an object alone or to bring it to somebody when ordered to do so. To prevent aggressive behaviour as far as food is concerned, food or treats should be placed in the dog's bowl while the dog is eating.

Puppies should be taught to feel comfortable in a kennel and be quite happy to be transported in one. They should also get used to being left on their own. Dogs react very well to positive, consistent training, even at a young age. This enriches their environment and inspires confidence knowing that there are predictable consequences to their behaviour.

A good puppy training class can help owners teach their treasured pet many of these things in a systematic, stress-free way, and can strengthen and enhance their relationship with their pet.