

## **Puppy Socialisation and Environmental Exposure:**

### **The importance of being sociable:**

Between 3 and 12 weeks of age, a puppy needs to meet a wide variety of people, situations and other animals. Experiences during the first year of a dog's life can make all the difference to their future temperament and character. Taking the time to socialise your puppy can result in a friendly, well-adjusted adult dog who enjoys the company of people, can be taken anywhere and lives life to the full!

A puppy who lacks experience with the world will find many things that we take for granted scary and is very likely to grow up to be a worried dog. A frightened and anxious dog is more likely to develop behaviour problems than a dog who has had a rich, varied and positive puppyhood.

### **The sooner the better**

The younger your puppy, the easier it will be to socialise them. As puppies get older, they become more cautious when faced with new experiences. The early weeks are particularly important because most puppies will approach anything or anybody willingly and without fear.

By the time your puppy reaches about 12 weeks of age, anything not yet encountered is likely to be approached with caution. Therefore it is vital that, between 3 and 12 weeks of age, a puppy meets a wide variety of people, situations and other animals.

## **Off-lead dog parks are not a good place to take your puppy.**

### **Off-leash dog parks?**

Socialisation, in particular up through the 16 week mark, is extremely important for a puppy. But, taking a puppy to the dog park for socialisation will not effectively socialise them in the way that it should. In fact, it can do way more harm than good.

In a perfect world, the dog park would be filled only with gentle and well-behaved dogs that could never instill fears or negative behaviors in your sweet little puppy. In addition, there would only be healthy dogs, no dogs with kennel cough, or other easily spread illnesses your puppy can be vulnerable to catching.

But, of course, that's an unrealistic view as there are all different doggy personalities found at the dog park, and unfortunately, sometimes illnesses can be spread as well. In addition, you may occasionally encounter irresponsible dog owners that don't monitor their dog's behavior resulting in dog fights (or close calls), or just negative interactions of one sort or another.

It's the chance we take when we bring our dogs to the dog park, and when we do go, we need to be very diligent and careful to maintain control amongst our dogs' interactions; but, there is no good reason to expose a puppy to these things before he is ready.

From birth to 16 weeks is the period in which puppies make decisions in their little brains about the world around them; what the good things are, and what the bad things are. Exposing them to positive experiences is crucial during this time period if you want to produce a well-balanced adult dog. Experiences from a dog park are not reliably going to produce positive experiences.

Socialising a puppy with people and other dogs is a necessity, but choosing the correct people and dogs is of equal importance. Seeking out a friend, family, or neighborhood dog that is reliably good-natured and laid back is a much better choice than randomly subjecting a puppy to some of the hooligan dogs that may show up at the dog park.



Negative experiences can result in forming behavioral issues in an impressionable young puppy. Dogs at a dog park can be highly excitable, play too rough, be dominant, or show aggressive tendencies. A puppy will form an opinion based on these experiences that can last a lifetime and which may be difficult, or even impossible, to reverse later on.

Illness can also be spread between dogs, so a puppy should never be brought to a dog park prior to receiving all vaccinations.

### **Vaccination versus socialisation**

Young animals are susceptible to disease before their immune systems have a chance to become effective. From a purely disease prevention perspective, it would be ideal to keep puppies isolated from other dogs completely until they are fully vaccinated (at 16 weeks or older).

Since keeping a puppy isolated until 16 weeks old is likely to have a devastating effect on their ability to cope with life in general, a compromise must be reached between the need to protect against disease, and the need to ensure good mental health.

The following recommendations are based on what we believe is a reasonable compromise between these two competing interests:

- **Up to 8wks of age - Prior to first vaccination** – should be kept at home.
  - Prep for the outside world via gentle training and exposure to different surfaces, sounds, smells and a variety of gentle people (including delivery people/posties!).
  - **The Sound Proof Puppy Training app comes in super handy at this stage and beyond.**
- **After the first vaccination** (at 6-8 weeks old) – Can attend puppy pre-school with pups under 16 weeks.
  - Can explore outside the home where safe, but must avoid other dogs.
  - Places to consider; sealed paths, local shopping area, car travel.
  - Keep outings to half hour or less and important to let pup explore at its own pace - including when meeting people.
- **From 1 week after the 2<sup>nd</sup> vaccination** (at 12-14 weeks old) – puppies can start going for walks on sealed surfaces but should not go onto public grassed areas especially dog parks.
  - Pups are safe to be in the company of other adult dogs whom are fully vaccinated, well in health and of calm and controlled temperament.
  - Avoid high dog traffic areas like Narrabeen Lake, Pittwater Road Church Point to Bayview, Des Creagh Reserve in Avalon.
  - Avoid bushy areas.
- **From 1 week after the final puppy vaccination** (at 16-18 weeks old) – pups need to continue to avoid off-leash parks until adequate and safe communication between dog and owner has been well established, and dog is fully mature (at least 1 year old).
  - That is, training a good and reliable recall away from other dogs. Not all dogs are suitable to off-leash parks.
  - However, pups at this age will have adequate vaccine immunity to interact with any other dog.



**Until your puppy is fully protected by vaccination:**

- **don't allow them to mix with dogs of unknown vaccination status**
- **don't take them to parks or walk in other areas that other dogs have soiled**
- **do take them out as much as possible in non-doggy areas.**

**It's so important to let them experience the world, just do it safely and sensibly!**