

Peer Reviewed

Laurie Bergman, VMD, Diplomate ACVB
Keystone Veterinary Behavior Services,
Villanova, Pennsylvania

Advice for Clients with New Puppies

What advice should I be giving to clients who come to the clinic with new puppies?

Each new puppy visit should be the start of a lifelong relationship between you and your new patient and its owner. As we educate pet owners to turn to their veterinarians for help with behavior problems, we need to educate ourselves about how to answer their questions regarding these problems—from the mundane to the more serious issues.

GENERAL ADVICE FOR NEW PUPPY OWNERS

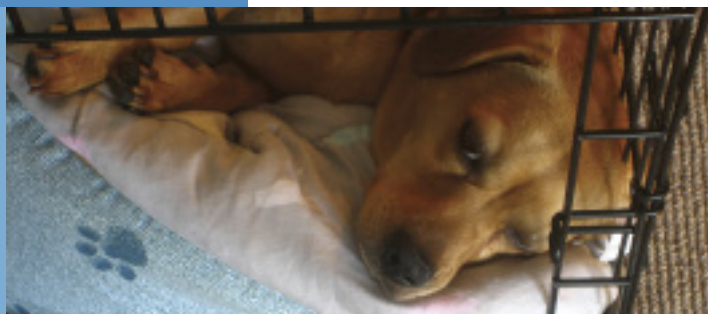
Regardless of whether this is the first pet in the house or the 20th, there are some general recommendations applicable to any pet owner and new puppy.

1. Make sure clients bring puppies in for an examination as soon as possible. A puppy that is sick, even if the illness is minor, will not adjust as well to a new home as a healthy puppy. In addition, owners often discover that the angelic pet they thought they adopted is much more of a little devil once it is feeling better.



2. Remind owners that puppies are babies. Even if a client has adopted an older, juvenile (> 4-month-old) puppy, it is still a young, growing animal that needs plenty of rest. The younger the puppy, the more rest it will need, but even older puppies should have some quiet time in a crate; exercise pen; or a baby gated, safe area. Tell owners that this quiet time also helps puppies learn to be alone and become accustomed to not receiving constant attention.

CONTINUES



When a Behavior Consult Is Needed

If you're dealing with a situation in which the older pets have a history of problems, either extreme fear and/or aggression, toward other animals, it's best to recommend a behavior consult. This will allow you to assess the severity of the situation, give the owners more precise instructions for handling the basic introductions and any problems that may arise, and provide a chance to teach them about preventing and avoiding problems.

A complete behavior consult is also a good recommendation if there is no previous history of problems but the current situation presents extreme issues. This might include the adult dogs being aggressive toward the puppy or the puppy not respecting the adult dogs, pestering them incessantly, or actually being aggressive in response to them.

With cats, a full consult is recommended if the cat is so fearful of the puppy that it is affecting its appetite, litter box use, or activity. Further intervention is also recommended if either the cat or the puppy is showing offensive aggression, such as stalking, seeking each other out, or attempting to attack.

3. Have owners make crate training a positive experience. The owner should feed the puppy in the crate, provide the puppy with its favorite toys and other long-lasting goodies, and put the crate in a location where the puppy can see and hear people (but the family should be doing quiet things that are less stimulating to the puppy). Remind owners to ignore the puppy if it is whining or crying, waiting until it is quiet before interacting with the puppy or letting it out. However, if it is frantic in the crate, advise the owners to talk with you about additional desensitization techniques.

4. Encourage owners to pay attention to the other pets in the home. The other pets should receive at least the same level of care and consideration that they were given before the new puppy arrived. The puppy's quiet or crate training time is the perfect opportunity to make sure other pets receive quality attention.

5. Talk to owners about training and socializing their new puppies. Positive reinforcement training provides a common language that bridges the communication gap between canine (usually body) language and human (usually verbal) language. Reward-based training is fun, builds a strong bond between pets and owners, and allows owners to effectively communicate what sort of behavior is expected. Puppy kindergartens that teach the foundations of positive reinforcement are a great way to begin this training, socialize the puppy, and prevent future behavior problems.

INTRODUCING PUPPIES TO OTHER DOGS

- **Location:** Based on research conducted at dog parks, we know that dogs show little aggression if introduced to each other on neutral territory. Young puppies should be introduced to other dogs at home in a yard or open space in the house. Older puppies that have completed their vaccines should be introduced to their new canine family members away from home on neutral territory. If there are multiple dogs in the home, the owner should introduce the puppy to each dog separately.
- **Preventing Fights:** Advise clients to remove any toys, bones, rawhides, or chews that could potentially cause a fight between the new puppy and other pets. Early interactions should be supervised and dogs should be separated during feeding. It's not unusual for young puppies to be injured or killed by adult dogs if they approach too closely when the other dog is eating.
- **Ongoing Supervision:** For at least the first couple of weeks, owners should supervise interactions between the new puppy and the adult dog(s) in the home. This also supports the need to supervise the puppy as part of house-breaking.
- **Play & Training:** If the puppy is being a pest toward the adult dogs or play is getting too rough, it's time for the puppy to have some quiet time in its crate or exercise pen. This is also a good time for the owner to do some simple training with both the adult dogs and new puppy. The puppy may need to be on a leash so it doesn't continue to try to encourage the other dogs to play.

INTRODUCING PUPPIES TO CATS

- **Initial Introduction:** Advise clients to have the puppy on a leash or in a crate when it first meets feline family members, especially if it's a rambunctious

puppy or the cats are shy. It may take the cats several days to weeks to feel comfortable around the puppy; this is normal and shouldn't be cause for alarm, as long as the cats are still eating, drinking, and interacting normally when the puppy is not present.

- **Puppy-Free Zones:** Owners should be sure that cats have escape routes to puppy-free zones, including elevated resting places. In addition, cats shouldn't have to pass through the puppy's area to get to the necessities of life, such as litter boxes, food dishes, or water.
- **Desensitization:** Cats can be desensitized to puppies at the same time that puppies are being taught to be calm around cats. While cats are eating, owners can work on simple training (sit-stay and down-stay) with the puppies. It should be on-leash and at a distance at first. Gradually, as the puppy and cats become comfortable with the routine, the puppy can be moved closer. Similarly, if a cat chooses to be in the same room as the puppy, both animals can be rewarded.
- **Ongoing Training:** If the owner notices that the puppy is getting overly excited or trying to chase the cats, then the puppy needs to be kept on-leash more often and the cats may need more escape routes and hiding

places. Cats should have their nails trimmed in case there are any close encounters with the puppy.

PREVENTING & SOLVING PUPPY PROBLEMS

The best way to help owners prevent problems with new pets is to be proactive:

- Include information about preadoption counseling in annual examination reminders, clinic newsletters, and other client educational materials.
- If you're aware of behavior problems with a client's dog, especially aggression toward other dogs, you can advise the client to wait until the dog is deceased before adopting a second dog.
- If a client comes to you after bringing a puppy into the home, assess the situation based on the client's current pets/situation and how things are proceeding with the new puppy.

If clients indicate that problems exist, but the dogs or cats have no prior history of difficulties living with other dogs, your first task is to evaluate the situation:

- Often owners will be upset by normal animal behavior, such as an adult dog that verbally "corrects" a rambunctious puppy or a cat that is hiding and hissing when first meeting a puppy.

Tx at a Glance

- Make sure your clients bring the puppy in for an examination as soon as possible.
 - Assess the situation with the puppy and other housemates.
 - Remind owners that this is a baby; even if clients have adopted an older, juvenile puppy, this is still a young, growing animal that needs plenty of down time.
 - Tell owners not to ignore the other pets in the house.
 - Give owners helpful tips to train and socialize the new puppy in the new environment.
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- In these situations, owners should intervene and give the animals a break from each other. Then, the next time the pets are together, the owner should make sure they are calm and respectful of personal space.
 - This may not come naturally to a puppy, so owners may have to gently move puppies away from other animals by calling the puppy, getting its attention with a squeaky toy, picking it up, or using a leash to guide it away.

Let owners know that they may need to:

- Spend more time supervising interactions between the puppy and its new housemates
- Make sure that all pets have space of their own
- Use positive reinforcement to counter-condition more positive responses, both behavioral and emotional, to other animals
- Most important, keep goals realistic.

Keeping Expectations Realistic

Owners may have unrealistic expectations about a new puppy becoming friendly with existing pets in the home, but the best they may get is peaceful coexistence. Not all individuals—canine, feline, or even human—become great friends with their roommates. This may be especially true when the adult animals in the house are senior citizens. Some older animals, even if they were playful as youngsters, just don't seem to enjoy puppies. As the puppy matures, its housemates may start to have more positive reactions to it.