

TOP 5

# TOP 5 PUPPY BEHAVIOR TIPS

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**Ellen M. Lindell, VMD, DACVB**  
*Veterinary Behavior Consultations*  
*Bethel, Connecticut*

**P**uppies are primed to learn, and veterinarians are in an ideal position to help them reach their full potential. Accurate, timely veterinary advice should be proactively provided to support the development of strong bonds between puppies and their new families.



## TOP 5 PUPPY BEHAVIOR TIPS

1. Socialization is time-sensitive.
2. Advise owners based on individual puppy temperaments.
3. Excellent early advice can prevent many problems.
4. All puppies can benefit from appropriate training.
5. Ask clients about potential behavioral concerns.

**1 Socialization Is Time-Sensitive.** Puppies develop quickly. The prenatal, neonatal, and transitional stages of development have already passed before most puppies leave their littermates and experience their first official veterinary examination.

Take advantage of the opportunity to influence the fourth stage of development: the sensitive period for socialization. Between the ages of approximately 4 and 14 weeks, puppies are more prepared to accept new people and animals than at any other time in their development.

Early exposure to a wide variety of people, healthy puppies, and friendly dogs, as well as to assorted sounds, sights, and scents, is crucial for normal development. If possible, introduce puppies to other species (eg, horses, cats, livestock, birds) as well. In short, this is the period to introduce puppies to anything they may encounter as an adult.

Even before the vaccination series is complete, puppies can be safely socialized. Reasonable precautions should be taken. For instance, puppies should interact with puppies and dogs that appear healthy and whose owners are following their veterinarian's advice regarding necessary vaccinations. The

risk for contracting a life-threatening disease is likely less than the risk for developing a behavioral concern secondary to inadequate socialization later in life.<sup>1-3</sup>

Behavior problems are the main reason that pets are relinquished to shelters,<sup>4,5</sup> so early socialization is critical; it cannot wait until the puppy is fully vaccinated.

**2 Advise Owners Based on Individual Puppy Temperaments.** All puppies are not created equal, and 8-week-old puppies are not clean slates. Genetics, diet, early illness, and early handling are some of the factors that can affect behavioral development. Help owners create reasonable expectations. For purebred puppies, share knowledge about breed traits.

Include a behavioral assessment during each puppy appointment. Normal, healthy puppies explore calmly or playfully, exhibit friendly behavior, are responsive when invited to interact, and can tolerate an examination. Puppies that exhibit fear or aggression or are unwilling to explore or interact need immediate help.<sup>6</sup>

Teach clients to watch for subtle signs of stress (eg, yawning, lip licking, looking sleepy, refusing treats). Socialization may need to be done at a slower pace, but it cannot be delayed.

**3 Excellent Early Advice Can Prevent Many Problems.** Puppies may exhibit normal yet undesirable behaviors (eg, jumping up, mouthing, destructive behavior, house soiling) that can be managed or prevented if clients are provided tools to set puppies up for behavioral success.

**Early socialization is critical and cannot wait until the puppy is fully vaccinated.**

► *Prevent jumping up*

- Teach the puppies to sit. This can be done during the first puppy visits.
- Next, ask puppies to sit before anyone pets them. Initially, holding toys or treats can keep puppies' attention until they sit.
- For overzealous puppies, 1 person can hold a leash just taut enough so sitting is more comfortable than jumping up.

► *Prevent mouthing*

- Puppies often mouth when they become excited during petting or play.
  - Always keep a toy handy. It is easy to teach puppies to hold a toy instead of a hand.
- Games such as fetch can keep puppies focused on toys instead of hands.

► *Prevent destructive behavior*

- Puppies explore the world with their mouths and benefit from having an assortment of toys that are regularly rotated to retain novelty.
- When supervision is not available, puppies should be confined in a safe area or crated with a safe chew toy or long-lasting treat. Food-dispensing toys keep puppies busy—at least 1 meal a day can be fed in a food-dispensing toy.

► *Prevent house soiling*

- Supervision is critical; help clients create an elimination schedule for puppies.
- Active puppies need to urinate as often as every 15 minutes. Puppies typically eliminate immediately after they wake up and within 10-20 minutes of eating.
- When supervision is not possible, puppies should be confined to a safe area or crate.
- If puppies need to be left alone for extended periods, provide a safe opportunity for relief. Confinement areas should include a sleeping place and a designated substrate for toileting.

–For example, a crate with bedding may be placed inside a larger enclosure such as a play-yard that contains a pad for elimination.

–Puppies should be left for no more than 1 hour for every 1 month in age, plus 1 additional hour.

- If a “mistake” occurs despite these preventive strategies, puppies should not be scolded—they are still learning.
  - Reprimands and raised voices create confusion and fear.
- Clean up accidents thoroughly with enzyme-based cleaners.

## **4 All Puppies Can Benefit From Appropriate Training.**

All puppies benefit from a structured, reward-based training program.

Training should begin immediately; early training teaches puppies how to receive information from humans. Puppies learn with all interactions.

Veterinarians may choose to offer a basic training and socialization class at their facility. Before referring a client to a trainer, inquire about the trainer's methods and qualifications. There is currently no regulating body for trainers, but excellent trainers will take advantage of continuing education to stay current in the field.

**Training should begin immediately; early training teaches puppies how to receive information from humans.**

## **WHAT IS A CERTIFIED TRAINER?**

The terminology used to describe trainer qualifications can be confusing. It is important to learn about the organization that issued the certificate. Two examples of specific certifications are KPA-CTP, issued by the Karen Pryor Academy, and CPDT-KA, issued by the Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers.

Trainers that have earned these titles have knowledge of learning theory and understand the importance of humane training methods.

**Create a checklist to inquire about normal undesirable behaviors.**

When possible, send a team member to observe or attend a training class. Confirm that the atmosphere is calm, that puppies and owners are treated with respect, and that reward-based methods are used. Research shows that confrontational training methods are associated with fear and aggression in dogs.<sup>7-9</sup>

## 5 Ask Clients About Potential Behavioral Concerns.

Be sure clients know that the veterinarians at the clinic are available and have the expertise to help prevent and solve behavior problems. Even young puppies may suffer from serious behavioral illnesses, and it is never too soon to refer a young patient to a veterinary behaviorist if the diagnosis is not clear.

### BEHAVIOR CHECKLIST FOR OWNERS

Below is a sample behavior checklist that can be distributed to new dog owners.

► Please let us know if you would like to discuss any of the following:

- Jumping Up
- Growling
- Barking
- Mouthing
- Destructive Behavior
- Housebreaking

Please list any other behavioral concerns:

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Collect a behavioral baseline during each puppy visit. Create a checklist to inquire about normal undesirable behaviors. These may be tolerated for the short term, but the client misconception may be that they will be “outgrown.” In fact, without intervention, these behaviors can strengthen because they can be self-rewarding and are therefore regularly reinforced.

Do not wait for the call from a frustrated client. Early identification, diagnosis, and treatment of behavior problems saves lives.

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### Suggested Reading

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