

Socialisation, training and pet owner competencies - what impression are we making?

Kersti Seksel

A well-behaved dog is welcome in most places. He doesn't jump up with muddy paws, always comes when called, doesn't bark unnecessarily and doesn't chew everything in sight. This dog is a joy to meet and a pleasure to own. However, we have all seen (and perhaps even own) a dog that pulls and drags its owner down the road, or a dog that snaps and bites when it is approached. So why are some dogs like this and others learn how to behave?

PET OWNERSHIP

Pets are an integral part of western society. Between 10-40% of households own dogs in various countries in Western Europe and in the United States. A 1995 survey determined that of Australia's 6.2 million households, 60% owned pets and of these, 68% had one or more dogs. Thus, approximately 2.5 million Australian households have at least one dog and many have more than one. On a per capita basis, Australia is the largest pet owning community in the world. However, each year about 20% of urban dogs are surrendered to pounds and animal shelters and of these, 80% are euthanased. In 1989 about 20 million dogs were surrendered to animal shelters and surveys indicated that 50-80% of these were because of behaviour problems.

The largest cause of death of puppies under one year of age is said to be euthanasia due to behavioural problems. Indeed, most dogs do not live to their full age potential with the average age of dogs in Australia estimated to be only 3.5 years. In fact, behaviour problems are now considered to be the number one reason for euthanasia in pets, regardless of age.

Surveys indicate that the factors that were most likely to lead to dogs being surrendered to an animal shelter were:

1. if the dogs had not attended obedience classes;
2. being sexually intact;
3. eliminating inside regularly; and
4. not receiving veterinary attention.

If the dog had a low purchase price (less than \$60), was less than 6 months old, and of mixed breed, the risk of surrender also increased.

In another survey 25.6% owners surrendering their dog did so because of behavioural problems in their pet. The most common problems were boisterousness (10%), aggression directed towards people (7.7%), and interdog aggression (9%). Of the dogs that were rehomed, 17.4% were returned to the shelter and 69.2% of these dogs were surrendered because of behavioural problems.

There are many factors that appear to increase the risk of dogs, especially puppies, being euthanased or abandoned. Incorrect choice of pet, unrealistic expectations of the dog, and an undervaluing or perhaps, ignorance of the time, money and effort required to be a responsible pet owner all contribute to the problem. The large numbers of dogs surrendered worldwide present a burden financially and emotionally to the people and organisations involved in dealing with the problem. Interventions, which might reduce the likelihood of euthanasia or abandonment of dogs, could help reduce these problems.

BEHAVIOUR PROBLEMS

Given that dogs live in the household, and are integrated into the social structure of the family, it is not surprising that there are occasions when the behaviour of the dog can be problematic. The problems can be minor and mildly irritating, such as jumping up when greeting the owner, or potentially dangerous such as aggression directed towards people. Although many times the behaviour is either accepted or successfully modified, if the behaviour is perceived to be a serious problem the owner may seek professional help for the dog, have it euthanased, or rehomed.

There has been a great deal of research regarding behavioural problems in dogs. Several large surveys indicated that some dog owners felt that their dog had a behaviour problem of varying degrees of severity. The reported prevalence of perceived problems or potentially dangerous problems range from 42% (Voith, Wright & Danneman, 1992) to 87% (Campbell, 1986).

Most of the commonly seen behavioural problems are usually behaviours that are disruptive to the household or potentially dangerous to people, other animals or to the animal itself. The behaviour is often socially unacceptable and undesirable but may in fact, be a normal behaviour. However, even normal behaviours when carried out at inappropriate times or to excess, may be considered abnormal.

Behaviour should always be considered in the context in which it occurs. It may be inappropriate for the owner when the dog urinates inside. However, if the dog's bladder is full and its access to the outside is blocked, then it is appropriate for the dog to urinate inside.

The most common problems apart from aggression, that dog owners report to veterinarians and dog trainers include behaviours such as digging, jumping up, barking, destructiveness and chewing. These are all normal behaviours and as such cannot be eliminated entirely. In fact, it is possibly detrimental to the dog's welfare to try to stop normal behaviours. However, they can be modified to a more socially acceptable behaviour by altering the time, place or duration of the behaviour. The owner also needs to understand why the dog may be behaving in this way and how to respond accordingly. A little basic understanding of the nature of a dog and its needs can be very helpful in dealing with the problem.

Many of these unacceptable, destructive and nuisance behaviours are exacerbated by boredom, confinement and lack of activity. Dogs are highly intelligent, active, social animals who need activity, company and stimulation. If these basic needs of dogs aren't met then it is not surprising that they find other ways of fulfilling these requirements.

PET SELECTION

People keep dog for many reasons including companionship, sport, prestige and security. These reasons need to be considered when dealing with dog owners whether in training classes or with urban animal management problems. Counselling owners about the most suitable breed for their particular circumstances *before* they actually acquire a dog would be the ideal situation. This is a service that veterinarians can offer to their clients but few do so at present. Services such as 'Select-a-Pet' are also available to help potential owners with advice on choosing a pet based on the temperament of various breeds, owner lifestyle, owner expectations and personal preferences. If potential owners are made aware of their dog's innate breed characteristics such as tendency to vocalise it may help them deal better with the dog's behaviour and make their expectations of behaviour modification more realistic.

SOCIALISATION PERIOD

The behaviour an animal exhibits at any time is influenced by three main factors. These are:

1. an animal's genetically inherited tendencies or predisposition to exhibit a particular behaviour;
2. the animal's previous experience and what it has learnt; and
3. the particular environment at the time.

If a dog is to be an obedient and welcome member of the household he needs to start off on the right paw from the moment he comes home. He needs to know what is expected of him and what is acceptable behaviour right from the beginning. Behaviours that might be cute when he is little won't be so acceptable when he is fully-grown, and unfortunately, he won't grow out of them! A new puppy needs to be taught good manners and that is what Puppy Preschool is all about. It is an early socialisation, training and owner education program designed to help owners and puppies get off on the right track in life!

The socialisation period has been classified as the 'critical period' for the formation of social relationships, during which even a small amount of experience can have long lasting effects. It has been established that the socialisation of puppies occurs somewhere between 4-12 weeks of age, although this is not rigidly fixed. Experimentally, puppies that were isolated from all human contact until 16 weeks of age failed to interact with each other, with humans or play with toys when they first emerged from isolation. With continued contact these puppies eventually became hyperactive but still showed a decrease in social contact with both humans and each other.

To develop into normal, friendly and confident adults, puppies need regular handling and to be exposed to many new and novel situations.

Puppies that are not exposed to other dogs during the socialisation period are likely to develop aggressive or fearful responses to other dogs later, just as puppies that are not socialised to humans often develop behavioural problems.

Hence, it is during this time that it is most important to expose the puppies to as many things and experiences as possible in a non-threatening way. The puppy needs to interact with its littermates, its mother and with humans for social relationships to be developed. Initially the puppy is very curious and willing to approach novel objects, especially moving ones, including other dogs and humans. Play barking and biting develop, as does the tail wag. Throughout this period, play also becomes more important and progressively more elaborate as the pup learns what is and what isn't socially acceptable (eg bite inhibition). If the puppy bites its playmate too hard play stops. Next time the puppy doesn't bite so hard thus the puppy learns to be less aggressive in its social interactions. Play also allows the puppy to develop confidence, manipulative skills and learn canine body language.

This is a period of rapid development and the puppy begins to notice its surroundings. The puppy has developed the sensory and motor abilities to be aware of its surroundings and is also able to react to them.

The end of the socialisation period is not rigidly fixed but is influenced by a number of factors including what the puppy has experienced during this time, its breed and also differences among individuals within a breed.

It appears that unless some socialisation occurred before 14 weeks of age, withdrawal reactions from humans were so great as to make puppies virtually untrainable. Early isolation appears to produce hyperactivity, affects fear responses and decreases learning ability. Yet many puppies are not homed until after this age or go to homes where they may not experience a wide variety of situations. Hence, it is important to provide opportunities for puppies to socialise and learn good manners and Puppy Preschools[®] are a good start.

Unfortunately, even though it would appear that Puppy Preschools[®] are becoming more widely accepted as an important step in the normal development of puppies, there is still more work to be done. A number of issues still need to be addressed. First of all, not all puppy-training classes are of the same standard. For a successful outcome the classes need to be controlled and run correctly with very experienced trainers in charge as during this very important period in a puppy's life there is as much potential for harm as there is for good to come out of the classes. They are not the place where inexperienced trainers learn their trade.

Additionally, the basics of learning theory and reward based training or motivational learning is still not well understood by many who run the classes and this can also lead to problems when conducting puppy-training classes. Although puppies are capable of learning a lot they have short concentration spans and are quite clumsy.

Puppy classes are not the same as obedience classes run with younger subjects. In fact, the aims of puppy classes are very different from obedience classes. They are about starting puppies off on the right track and teaching good manners not about obedience commands and teaching perfection in the obedience ring. Apart from teaching puppies the purpose is also to educate owners about pet ownership, normal behaviour and give them realistic expectations about their dog, and help the dog and the owner form a strong bond with each other.

OBEDIENCE TRAINING

Pet owners attend obedience classes for many different reasons, but most do not wish to go on to competition level. They just want to be able to manage their dog in and outside their home. However, traditional training classes have focussed on competition work and this has contributed to a large drop out rate and often feelings of dissatisfaction with the classes. Additionally, obedience training has been seen as the answer to all behaviour problems, yet behaviour problems are not the same as training problems or even problems due to lack of training. Owners have taken their dogs to obedience training classes to help resolve their dog's behaviour problem but unfortunately not all trainers are competent in dealing with many of these problems and some problems should not be dealt with in the training class forum. In my opinion the obedience-training situation is not a suitable one for dealing with problems like aggression.

Although there is much attention given to the socialisation period, and even to sexual maturity, not enough has been given to social maturity and the behavioural changes that occur during this time. Trainers, as well as owners, need to be aware that this is also a time of change in the dog's development and is also the time when many behaviour problems, such as aggression, first present themselves.

Basic obedience training should really be considered as teaching good manners to dogs. To have good manners a dog needs to know four commands: "sit", "come", "stay" and "down". This can be considered the equivalent of the four words we consider when we think of people with good manners "please", "thank you", "hello" and "good bye". Additionally dogs need to know how to walk nicely on a loose lead and not pull when out walking. All these commands can be taught to puppies as well as adult dogs using the same positive methods. The Delta Society's accredited Canine Good Citizen[®] program (CGC) is one which addresses these issues and provides a suitable forum for pet owners and their dogs.

WHERE TO NOW?

Although, pre-pet selection services, Puppy Preschool[®] classes and CGC[®] classes are a step in the right direction they are still only reaching a small minority of pet owners. Additionally, they appear to mainly reach the already responsible pet owners. Education would appear to be the answer but how to reach the others is an issue that still needs further investigation.

USEFUL REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

Puppy Preschool® and Kitten Kindy® videos with instruction manuals and client handouts are now available from the Australian Small Animal Veterinary Association. These 8-minute videos illustrate the training techniques used in these classes and are suitable for trainers, veterinarians, veterinary nurses and clients.

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Kersti graduated in Veterinary Science from Sydney University and became very interested in animal behaviour while working overseas. To further her knowledge she went back to university graduating from Macquarie University with a BA in Behavioural Sciences with a major in psychology. In 1992 she began developing the program of Puppy Preschools® in veterinary hospitals around Australia. This interest led her to complete a MA (Hons) degree by thesis on the long and short term behavioural effects of puppy socialisation and training programs. She is a registered specialist in animal behaviour, one of only two Fellows of the Australian College of Veterinary Scientists in Animal Behaviour and a Diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists. She has studied at Cornell University, USA, University of Pennsylvania, USA, Guelph University, Canada and Queensland University, Australia and is a NSW Veterinary Surgeons Board registered Animal Behaviour Consultant. In 1999 she spent 7 months on faculty at the University of Pennsylvania, based in the Department of Clinical Studies, Animal Behavior Clinic.

Kersti has presented at conferences and meetings in Australia, NZ, UK, Japan, Europe and USA. She has published numerous papers on animal behaviour in scientific journals, magazines and periodicals and is a regular contributor to print and electronic media. Currently she is a regular presenter on Channel 7 and ABC radio on pet care and behaviour as well as columnist in Dog's Life and Your Garden magazines on behaviour problems.

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