

# **The principles of canine good citizens and puppy preschool**

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## **ABSTRACT**

We have long recognised the advantages of pet ownership. Pets provide us with companionship, security and numerous health benefits. We have also recognised that some pets are better behaved than others and these pets are a joy to own and meet. Puppy Preschool aims to socialise dogs so that they learn to interact well with other dogs, and with children and adults, as well as to teach basic obedience. The Canine Good Citizen program follows on from the early training to help dogs and owners learn together in a fun and informative way to be good citizens on both ends of the lead.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Pets are part of our everyday life. We have long recognised the advantages of pet ownership. Pets provide us with companionship, security and numerous health benefits. They bring pleasure and joy to those that own them - or do they?

In 1976, 48% of Australian households had dogs as pets. The national People and Pets Survey conducted in 1994 found that 60% of Australia's 6.2 million households owned pets. Sixty eight percent of these households care for one or more dogs.

But each year up to 20% of these urban dogs are surrendered to pounds and animal shelters and of these 80% are euthanased (Murray and Penridge 1992). In 1990, J. Norris, Ku-Ring-Gai Municipal Council's Dog Control Officer, surveyed animal shelters and pounds and estimated that more than 300,000 dogs were euthanased in NSW alone (personal communication). In the United States in 1989 about 20 million dogs were surrendered to animal shelters. Surveys indicated that 50-80% of these dogs were surrendered because of behavioural problems (Burghardt 1991). There is no reason to doubt that the same holds true for Australia.

It is often said that the main cause of death of puppies under one year of age is not due to accidents or illness but to euthanasia because of behavioural problems. We have all met or heard about dogs that present a problem, not only to their owners but also to society in general. They are the aggressive ones, the barkers and general nuisances. The media and anti dog lobby dwell on them. Most dogs are not a problem to anyone but we rarely hear about them.

Thousands of dogs are destroyed each year because of behavioural problems, many of which could be preventable. Education of the owner, first in puppy selection and then in all aspects of pet care and responsible pet ownership is essential if these numbers are to be reduced. Problems with dogs are one of the most difficult and persistent neighbourhood problems which need to be dealt with by councils.

## **So what can be done?**

The answer lies in education not legislation. Puppy Preschool aims to get owners and puppies started on the right track. If followed by the Canine Good Citizen program this should be a good start.

As a veterinarian I find the dog that has to be pulled, dragged or carried into the vet surgery and then snaps and bites when approached is no fun to treat. It is much easier and less time consuming if the dog happily trots in the door, wagging its tail and sits patiently on the examination table while the nails are trimmed or blood is taken. This dog is a joy to treat and a pleasure to own.

Puppy Preschool originated to help owners understand their dog and to achieve a much larger percentage of manageable and sociable animals. It is designed to be the first step on the road to being a 'good' and enjoyable pet.

Both Puppy Preschool and The Canine Good Citizen Program aim to achieve:

- a dog you would like to own;
- a dog you would welcome as a neighbour;
- a dog that can socialise with other dogs;
- a dog that can cope with the stresses of modern living;
- a dog that is accepted by the wider community; and
- an owner that is fully informed on all aspects of responsible pet ownership

## **PUPPY PRESCHOOL**

Puppy Preschool is specifically designed for puppies 6 - 16 weeks of age. It is NOT obedience classes for young puppies! The classes are designed as a step by step program to allow the puppies to develop into well balanced adult dogs with well informed and responsible owners.

Puppies should start out on the right track. It is much easier to teach the puppy the correct and socially acceptable behaviour first, rather than try and correct bad behaviours later, when the puppy has had 6 months or more in which to learn them.

This type of early training and socialisation was promoted by Dr Ian Dunbar in the USA with his Puppy Parties concept many years ago. These extremely popular puppy playgroups are now run in many places around the world. Over the past 6 years we have modified this concept to suit our own requirements and run these classes in our veterinary practice.

The goal of Puppy Preschool is to educate both the dog and the owner. We aim to:

1. Socialise the dog and make him/her a good, obedient and enjoyable pet to own. The dog learns how to play as well as to cope with lots of different people, loud noises, other dogs, cats, children and novel stimuli early in life.
2. Teach basic commands such as sit, stay, heel, come using positive reinforcement.
3. Teach owners about the normal behaviour of dogs, how to recognise early behavioural problems and how to prevent them as well as covering aspects such as how to house train, how to stop biting and barking.
4. Make visits to the veterinary clinic an enjoyable experience.
5. Educate owners on other aspects of pet care, ie nutrition, dentistry, bathing, grooming that may not be adequately covered in a normal 15 minute consultation.

Many dog owners may not be aware of normal puppy or adult dog behaviour and these classes can help rectify this situation. The classes promote responsible pet ownership and forge a very strong bond between the owner and the puppy.

### **So why start with Puppy Preschool?**

## **BACKGROUND**

The dog is generally thought to have evolved from the wolf, *Canis lupus*, possibly about 12,000 years ago and its social behaviour is very similar to this species. The dog, like the wolf, lives in a group or pack with a strong social hierarchy. Both species are also strongly territorial. It is these qualities that attracted man to the dog in the first place as a companion and we have selectively bred for these and other characteristics over the years. It is some of these qualities that make the dog a good pet as it is able to fit into the social structure of the family unit.

Dogs have several periods of development on their way to adulthood. These are known as the neonatal, transitional and juvenile periods. The socialisation period of puppies occurs somewhere between 4-12 weeks of age, although this is not as rigidly fixed as first thought. During this sensitive period of development it is important to expose puppies to as many novel things and experiences as possible in a non-threatening way. Unfortunately, many puppies are not homed until after this age or go to homes where they may not experience a wide variety of situations. A puppy living with a sedentary elderly couple may never be exposed to children or loud noises and develop a fear of such things, which may translate to aggression or a phobia later.

During the socialisation period we see many new behaviours develop in the puppy's repertoire. The eyes and ears have opened and the teeth are beginning to erupt. The spinal cord also begins to mature and myelinate about this time so that a 4 week old puppy has developed the senses to be aware of its environment and so can start to react in adult ways to its surroundings. Young puppies are usually willing to approach novel objects, in particular moving ones, including other dogs and humans. Play barking and biting develop at this stage along with tail wagging.

During this time it is important that puppies are able to interact with their litter mates, their mother and with humans so that social relationships can develop. They need to learn the skills to read canine body language and play is one way of doing this.

Play becomes more important and progressively more elaborate as the puppy learns what is and what isn't socially acceptable. Inhibition of biting is learnt during play. 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. It is possible that dominance and subordination experienced during play may help dogs accept rank differences later. This is essential for the pack if it is to live in harmony later. Wright (1980) studied social dominance in puppies and found that an assertive puppy could retain its dominance whereas the more subordinate puppies could change rank several times prior to three months of age.

This early socialisation period has been classified as the 'critical period' for the formation of social relationships. Even a small amount of experience then can have long lasting effects. Studies by Thomson and Heron (1954) found that puppies reared in restricted environments from 4-7 weeks of age became very exploratory (even hyperactive) in new situations. They reacted inappropriately to potentially noxious stimuli such as pin pricks or burning matches. Normally reared puppies avoided such stimuli. Fuller (1964) raised puppies in partial and total isolation. Puppies isolated from all human contact until 16 weeks of age (K-puppies) failed to interact with each other, with humans or even play with simple toys when they were first taken out of isolation. With continued contact these K-puppies eventually became hyperactive but they had less social contact with both humans and each other. Unless some socialisation occurred before 14 weeks of age, withdrawal reactions from humans were so great that these puppies proved to be virtually untrainable later. From these studies it appears that early isolation produces many detrimental effects including hyperactivity, abnormal fear responses and decreased learning ability.

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.

To develop into normal, friendly and confident adults, puppies need regular handling and to be exposed to many novel situations in a non-threatening manner during this sensitive period. Puppies that do not have the opportunity to interact with other dogs during the socialisation period are likely to have abnormal behavioural responses (eg aggressive or fearful responses) to other dogs later, just as puppies that are not adequately socialised with humans can exhibit undesirable or abnormal responses (eg fear or abnormal 'bonding') to people. To take advantage of this period of development and modify behaviour correctly run Puppy Preschool can be a real bonus.

## **TECHNIQUES**

All the teaching is done using operant conditioning with rewards or positive reinforcement. Operant conditioning really consists of training an animal to perform a task to obtain a reward. The puppy's behaviour is controlled by its consequences so the likelihood of it being repeated depends on the nature of the consequences. Thus, if the consequence is pleasurable, ie a reward or positive reinforcer (eg food, praise or other motivator), then the behaviour is more likely to be repeated.

Initially the puppy is rewarded all the time. This means the puppy will learn the desirable behaviour very quickly. However, once the behaviour is learnt, a partial reinforcement schedule is introduced. This way the learnt behaviour is more likely to persist for longer.

Rewards must be given immediately after the response if they are to be effective. Even a delay as short as 5 seconds can considerably alter the time taken to learn a new behaviour. The reward is usually food as most dogs find this the most desirable reward but it is always paired with a pat or verbal reward such as 'good dog'.

Thus the puppy is always rewarded for good behaviour and the reward will vary according to the response. Sometimes the puppy is rewarded for sitting with a food treat, at other times it may just get a pat on the head. Hence a variable reinforcement program is introduced to the puppy. Poker machines are a good example of variable reinforcement. Why do we keep putting our money in the slot? Because we never know what the pay out will be nor when the pay out will come!!

It is vitally important when training puppies at such a young age that the focus is ALWAYS on positive reinforcement or reward. A new puppy in the household does not yet know what is expected of it. So, rather than punish the puppy for doing the wrong thing it should first be taught what is expected. If a reprimand is used, it should be given in under 5 seconds for the puppy to learn an association.

Many owners still believe that house-training a puppy involves rubbing their nose in it and shouting, so we aim to teach more modern and humane techniques. The owners are also taught acceptable games to play with their pups which do not overstimulate the dog and possibly encourage aggression.

All puppies appear to benefit from Puppy Preschool but these classes are especially helpful in identifying the potential 'problem' cases. Dominant puppies can be identified and special instructions given to the owners to prevent problems such as aggression developing. Shy, submissive or fearful dogs can also be identified and their behaviour modified.

## **STRUCTURE**

The Puppy Preschool classes are run for 1 hour each week over a four week period. Preferably, puppies are 8-16 weeks of age though slightly younger or older ones are included, depending on temperament and breed. A group of 5-6 is ideal so that all puppies and owners can get individual attention. All members of the family are encouraged to attend as everyone in the family needs to be able to control the dog. At the end of each class notes are handed out that reiterate the lessons taught that day.

The classes are taught off lead as that is when most owners find they have problems. A lot of owners for instance, complain that the dog suddenly becomes deaf at the park and will not come when called. Basic obedience such as 'come', 'sit', 'stay', 'drop', 'wait' and 'heel' are taught. The classes always include a play session as it is important for dogs to learn how to play and read canine body language but the play sessions must be controlled or the dogs may learn inappropriate behaviours.

These are NOT obedience classes done on younger subjects. Many techniques designed for older dogs, such as check chain correction, can actually be harmful to the young puppy. If the puppy has learnt these exercises with positive reinforcement there should really be no reason to ever use a check chain.

## **BENEFITS**

- Identification and correction of behaviour problems can be done at an early age;
- better behaved adult dogs with more responsible pet owners;
- increased rapport with clients and pets;
- increased self esteem and responsibility for nursing staff;
- allows time to educate clients on all aspects of pet care;
- lots of FUN, for staff, owners and puppies alike; and
- gets puppies started off on the right paw!

But this is only the beginning. Just as we send our children first to preschool, then on to primary school and then further education we should do the same for our dogs.

## **CANINE GOOD CITIZEN PROGRAM (CGC)**

The drop out rate in the USA for obedience classes is estimated to be about 55%. Less than a quarter of one percent of registered dogs in the USA compete in obedience trials at any stage. The figures in Australia would probably be similar. There are many reasons for this and we need to consider that training needs are possibly not being met at standard obedience classes. Most beginners just need to learn how to teach their dog how to 'come', 'sit', 'stay' and 'heel' but generally the classes are geared towards competition.

Not everyone wants a dog to do a perfect figure of eight. For most owners and dogs it is not an essential skill for being a good pet. The relevance of a figure of eight or a perfect finish is totally lost on the owner who can't even catch the dog in the first place.

The Canine Good Citizen program is designed to assess a dog's practical skills for living in the home and community. It is not just another obedience competition and should not be considered as such. It has been designed for all dogs, large and small, and not just purebreds. Most importantly it is designed to be FUN as well as beneficial and relevant as all community oriented training classes should be!

The CGC program is a structured 10 week course with a beginning and a definite end. Owners who wish to go further with competition can be encouraged to do so and further their skills if they so wish. The CGC program is designed to produce happy, well adjusted dogs and responsible well informed owners - 'Good Citizens on Both Ends of the Leash'.

## **BACKGROUND OF THE CGC**

In 1989, James Dearing the Secretary of the American Kennel Club introduced the CGC program in response to rising anti-dog feeling in the USA. This program has proved to be a huge success with over 220,00 canine good citizens in the USA alone. Many States have passed resolutions supporting the program. The program is now also used in England, Japan and is starting in Europe. The Guide Dogs for the Blind, Therapy Dogs International and Canine Companions for Independence have included the program in their training courses.

In Australia the CGC officially started in South Australia in April 1992. It began as a 6 month pilot program funded by the SA Government's Dog Advisory Committee. Three organisations, the South Australian Canine Association, the Australian Veterinary Association and 'Life Be In It', combined to produce a unique multifaceted Australian program. In the USA there is often no official training program, just a fun day with dogs and owners invited to take the test. It was felt that more than just a test was needed so a six week program was devised, after which the CGC test could be taken. This makes the Australian program unique as three separate components are combined. These are:

1. Training component (SA Canine Association).
2. Education component (Australian Veterinary Association).
3. Recreation component ('Life Be In It').

In NSW the CGC program was started independently in July 1992 by People-Pet Partnership (Australia). This is a non profit organisation dedicated to the welfare of all dogs as well as the education of their owners. The organisation was concerned with the high drop out rate at obedience schools and what happened to these dogs. The PPP are now involved with dog training, hospital visits and the Prevent-a-bite program.

## **STRUCTURE**

The NSW CGC program adopted the three components of the SA program. The People-Pet Partnership designed a 10 week step by step program. Over the 3 years it has developed and evolved and even now it is constantly being updated and evaluated to ensure that the best possible program is used and it keeps up to date with new knowledge. The original test has been altered and the factors of road safety and 'come when called' have been incorporated. The dogs are taught basic obedience commands such as 'come', 'sit', 'stay' and 'drop' as well as how to walk on a loose lead. They are also required to show confidence and control when faced with another dog or other distractions and must be able to be left alone and show good training and manners. The dogs are taken into real life situations such as street walks and visits to the vet.

In June 1994, PPP joined with The NSW Animal Welfare League to further this program. In March 1995 they initiated an on-going Canine Good Citizen Instructors course which should hopefully see many well informed instructors running similar courses Australia wide.

## **TECHNIQUES**

Training in the CGC program uses positive reinforcement and operant conditioning. It is reward based training and the use of head collars and flat collars is encouraged as a sensible and humane training method rather than using force or check chains. Food is used as a reward well as other motivators such as a game or a special toy.

Three main components of the Canine Good Citizen Program are:

1. Behavioural training using positive motivational methods.  
The instructors have to know traditional training methods as well as have knowledge of behavioural training. They need to have an understanding of canine behaviour and how to help in solving behaviour problems as well as basic companion pet obedience.
2. Education for pet owners.  
The owners are taught about the responsibilities of dog ownership, the dog laws, health care, grooming, diet, worming, vaccinations and basic first aid.
3. Emphasis is on training for 'real life' situations, socialisation, recreation and enjoyment of dogs.  
Important aspects include socialisation with other dogs and people, community dog walks and fun activities such as agility and games.

When the dogs have successfully completed the CGC program they are awarded a certificated and a distinctive numbered lead that can easily be identified in the street. Dogs that have completed the CGC program will also be better companions or pets, show dogs, obedience trialing dogs, agility dogs and animal assisted activity dogs (hospital visits).

## **BENEFITS FOR COUNCILS**

Better behaved dogs mean that there are fewer complaints and neighbourhood disputes and fewer problems for councils. Early training of dogs and owners through well run Puppy Preschool should help prevent many dog problems. However, if there are problems with dogs, for example, with barking, the CGC instructor should be able to help or at least refer the owners to expert help regarding these problems. In general the CGC instructor should be equipped to handle basic problems and to help and hence provide a valuable resource for councils.

The CGC should not be viewed as just obedience training but as a resource to help the problem dog and the owner not only back into the community but also to be a productive member of the community.

**Dogs are not born trained nor are their owners born knowing how to train them. Just as we educate our children we must educate our dogs and owners!**

A video of Puppy Preschool is available from the author. This is an 8 minute video that illustrates the training techniques used in these classes.

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Graduated in veterinary science from Sydney University in 1977, then worked in small animal practice Sydney then U.K. Graduated from Macquarie University 1990 with BA in Behavioural Sciences with major interest in psychology. Presently engaged in MA(hons) in animal behaviour at Macquarie University. NSW Veterinary Surgeons Board registered Animal Behaviour Consultant. Member American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior. Member Australasian Society for the Study of Animal Behaviour. Member Delta Society. Currently partner in multi-person small animal practice in Seaforth, Sydney with referral practice for animal behaviour problems. Actively involved in developing and running Puppy Training Courses. Patron People-Pet Partnership, Canine Good Citizen program, Sydney.

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