

Asheville Humane Society is an advocate for puppy socialization and early training.

Confidence, self-assurance and composure are characteristics that we all want in adult dogs.

Confident dogs are better able to trust their owners, strangers and deal with things in the environment. They are less likely to exhibit fearful or aggressive behaviors, more behaviorally healthy and longer lived than dogs that are not socialized or had early exposure to domestic sights, sounds, smells and activities.

This program will help foster parents raise a litter of puppies whose outlook on life is happier, more confident with an overall well-being. An in-litter socialization program in a quiet, secure and safe environment with a mother dog present should bring about a happier, more confident and playful dog ready for the transition to their new home. Neophobia (the fear of new, novel or unfamiliar) has a huge bearing on understanding puppy development. Pups between 3-12 weeks have an innate 'bounce back' ability. This means that puppies may initially startle at the introduction of new things but quickly replace their curiosity with investigation. The more exposure the puppy receives during this period of time (critical socialization period), the better able the pup will be to cope in the future.

Research shows that stimulus deprived dogs have energy levels six times higher than the average dog. Hyperexcitement is typically not a behavior that the average pet owner is willing to live with.

Here are 10 tips foster parents and owners can do to improve the confidence of every puppy:

1. Teach Puppies to Love Handling

Touching and holding puppies within the first 3 weeks of life is critical to help improve their ability to handle stress, learn and problem solve as adults. Puppies should get used to being restrained, cuddled with and kissed (being close to human breath). By so doing, puppies will be able to better cope with the demands of being a pet dog. Handling ears, feet and mouth are also critical. Early handling stimulates the puppy's brain to switch on, enhancing neurological stimulation. These dogs are typically more biddable, easier to train and have better coping skills later on in life. As the weeks progress, invite as many people in as possible to carefully and methodically handle puppies away from their littermates. Pups that have been handled by a variety of people have a significantly reduced risk of becoming aggressive and are less likely to bite household members or visitors.

2. Provide Positive Experiences with Unfamiliar People.

Pet dogs that have positive social experiences as puppies will be able to enjoy the company of people, regardless of their gender, race or age. Puppies should be friendly, curious and excited to see people, not shy, timid, fearful or aggressive. Your goal is to expose each puppy (on an individual basis) to as many new people of as possible (of all ages) and all of this must occur before the pup reaches 12 weeks of age.

3. Provide Positive Experiences with Unfamiliar Dogs.

As with people, puppies need to be socialized and have positive experiences with other dogs to avoid being fearful or aggressive with dogs outside of their litter, even if they are not fully vaccinated. The dogs that you socialize the pups with should be social with all dogs, healthy and fully vaccinated. A negative experience with a dog at a young age could have an everlasting impact. Supervision is critical to avoid early trauma.

4. Expose Puppies to Toys and Teach them to Play.

Giving toys to the puppies encourages pups to interact with new things. Puppy play teaches important rules of canine social interaction and is a vital part of bite inhibition and dog-to-dog communication. Without making toys available, the pups will have no alternative but to focus on each other. This can lead to many behavior problems later on in life (e.g., leash frustration to get to another dog, choosing other dogs as a priority over people and much more). Furthermore, encourage the pups to play with people. Play enhances the human/animal bond, helps teach bite inhibition, cooperation and increases a positive association with people.

5. Introduce Puppies to Different Surfaces and Sounds.

In order to become a confident dog, pups need to experience walking on different surfaces and hearing typical household sounds. At 5 weeks of age, pups start to become wary of new things. Wariness is not fear - it's about the possibility of potential dangers. Introduce the puppies to different objects so they can investigate as a group, in pairs and on their own. It is highly encouraged that you introduce one new novel object each day. This should include surfaces (grass, carpet, tile floors, linoleum), toys (balls, plush, chews), agility-type surfaces (steps, tunnels, logs, boxes), movements (cars, being picked up, carried) and much more. Pups that are exposed to novel surfaces and sounds tend to be less stressed and vocalize less when they are introduced to new situations (i.e., their first home).

6. Present Puppies to Appropriate Challenges and Encourage Independent Problem Solving.

People tend to shield puppies from being frightened and avoid any type of interaction that might cause minor stress. While you should never terrify a puppy, pups need to be carefully pushed to gain confidence. By pushing, we mean doing things that might be hard for them to take them out of their comfort zone. By 6 weeks, pups need situations that are physically and mentally challenging and even a bit stressful. Pups need to struggle to build confidence. Some challenges can be climbing on something like a platform, walking in water, crawling under something, crossing a unique surface. They might whimper or cry, fail over and over and get stressed. Allow the pup to problem solve and avoid rescuing him. If you pick him up or place him on the objects, you are not raising a pup that will be an independent thinker that looks at new adventures as a challenge which he wants to conquer. Puppies become more and more confident with each success. If you are rescuing the pup and not challenging his brain, when he is an adult, he will become easily frustrated with simple tasks, vocalize and become stressed.

7. Feed Pups from Multiple Bowls.

When pups are weaned, it is natural for competition to exist between littermates. Providing a food bowl for each puppy in the litter reduces competition and the possibility of resource guarding later in life. If a puppy grows to keep other littermates away, the aggressive behavior is successful and more likely to repeat later on in life. Pups should go to their new homes believing that there is no need to compete over food.

8. Start House and Crate Training.

Housetraining should begin as early as 4-5 weeks of age. Take pups outdoors to help with training when they wake up, after eating and regularly during the day to avoid having them soil in their living area. Since pups have substrate preferences at an early age, getting the pups outdoors on grass, gravel or concrete as early as possible will help pups to get house trained quickly in their new home.

Crate training should start at about 5-5.5 weeks of age. Once you are taking the pups outdoors to relieve themselves as often as possible to avoid continually relieving themselves in their living area, set up a few crates for them. a) Tire them out as best as you can. b) Put 2-3 pups in one crate for a nap. They may start complaining but walk away and let them learn to go to sleep in the crate. c) When they wake up (1-2 hours), take them outside to potty. Repeat 5-6 times a day. d) Gradually begin to put them individually in crates. They will start to complain again but learning to deal with mildly stressful situations is necessary. Overnight in crates will be more difficult and isn't suggested since they cannot be expected to hold their bladder all night until they are at least 8 weeks of age. Even then, they may still need a trip outdoors in the middle of the night.

9. Take Them For Rides in a Car

A trip home from the shelter shouldn't be the first time a pup is exposed to a vehicle. Starting at 4 weeks, start to take the pups for a ride in the car ensuring that they are crated and safe. You can begin by putting 2 pups together but slowly take one pup at a time into the car. Pups need to learn how to deal with stressful situations on their own and not be dependent on their littermates.

10. Start Training Their Brain!

The average puppy will learn more between the ages of 3-16 weeks than he will in his entire lifetime. When stimulated during this period of time, his brain matures faster and learning becomes easier and responses are much quicker than dogs that have never been stimulated at an early age. What occurs during this critical period of development has an everlasting emotional and cognitive effect on the dog. Reward-based training should begin as early as 5 weeks. Pups are little sponges and eager to learn.

What happens during the first three months of life has a direct influence on a puppy's ability to succeed as a family pet. By giving pups an enriched environment, social interactions and accepting of handling, the pup will adapt easier to its new life.

By following these 10 tips you will help raise a physically and behaviorally healthy dog.

Check out our website for a list of our classes or for additional behavioral help



ashevillehumane.org/get-involved/foster/resources

