

THE IMPORTANCE OF EARLY PUPPY SOCIALIZATION

BY AMY GREENWOOD BURFORD

In a recent meeting with canine behaviorist, Ian Alldredge, an observation was made regarding the APBT that was both flattering and alarming at the same time. Ian's comment was about the excellent trainability and stable temperaments he observed in the numerous APBT that he has dealt with over the years. He went on to comment that many APBT owners and breeders do not understand the importance of early socialization of their pups. He said that this is especially common among breeders with a kennel of dogs. His one request of the ADDBA was to educate breeders and owners about the positive effects of early socialization of puppies between eight weeks and six months of age.

A number of years ago, the American Kennel Club published an article on a study that was conducted on litter box stressors and performance dog outcome. The research design included positional changes, exercises and socialization for the pups in the first weeks of life. Puppy growth and development was tracked as well as follow-up and testing years later as these dogs completed training and became working and performance dogs. The hypothesis was that pups who received socialization in the litter box and were required to adapt to stressors (position changes and exercises) would develop better intelligence, attachments to people and physical strength and coordination than the control group that was left alone with their dam in the litter box, with little handling.

A few years ago, I attended an all day workshop, Tricks of the Trade by Pat Hastings, a long time breeder, AKC Judge and professional handler. Pat and her husband Bob, developed a puppy evaluation system that I have used with good results. In this seminar, Ms Hastings introduced the 'rule of seven' for breeders. By seven weeks of age, puppies need to have eaten from seven different food dishes, been exposed to seven different areas of the house and yard, and walked on seven different surfaces or levels. Pups that have been socialized in a calm and safe manner prior to seven

weeks of age will develop confidence and easily become accepting of strange things.

Canines have four mechanisms for coping and interacting with their environment: fight, flight, submit and ignore. The fight or flight strategy is based in the dogs instinctual responses and the ignore and submit strategy are learned response based on training and socialization. A dog that has been adequately socialized prior to six months of age, is able to generalize, a valuable learning tool. An example of this would be that once a dog had been socialized to accept a six year old child as OK, the dog could then accept all six year old children as OK. Without this ability to generalize, then each six year old child the dog would come in contact with would have to be checked out before being accepted. Dogs that have been isolated in a kennel environment and received little socialization prior to reaching six months of age, does not develop the ability to generalize. This can hamper the dog's ability to adapt to his environment and learn for the rest of his life.

Early socialization and training should be positive, with calm and assertive leadership from the trainer or human pack leader. Pups should be given earned affection, the right way. No stroking, kisses or hugs. To a dog these primate based behaviors send confusing messages. Firm pats, and vocal praise such as 'good dog', can be given for behavior you want to see repeated. Bad behavior, or behavior that you do not want to see repeated should be corrected or ignored. Dogs want to please the pack leader and will quickly learn which behaviors will get the desired response from you. When a dog is not trained or trained with dominant forceful methods, he will begin to regard children as inferiors and below himself in the pecking order. He will express his position with aggressive behaviors. A dog will pass on to his inferiors what he has received from his pack leader. Some of the dominant training methods that have been popular in the past couple of decades in-

clude the alpha wolf roll, the chin slap, the ear piercing whistle, the hard jerk, the string up and hanging and the scruff shake. Any training method using any of these techniques or any others associated with pain or punishment can have detrimental effects and should NOT be used. These training methods have been credited with the development of dogs that respond to threats with what can be termed a critical reaction. These are dogs that turn from friendly to aggressive and back to friendly again, in response to threats or unstable energy. Over permissive, owners giving inappropriate unearned affection, with periods of attempts to dominate with pain and punishments leads to confusion and frustration and the Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde phenomenon.

When a pup is seen as a member of the family and is not given limits or boundaries and is allowed to self train, his teachers become self gratification and survival, and his instinctual responses will dominant – the fight or flight response. This conditions the dog to become fearful or aggressive. A pup needs to be treated as a dog and his canine needs of adequate feed and water, shelter, health care needs and adequate exercise addressed first. The pup's emotional needs, to give him a sense of security, will be met by having his owner assume the position of master under any and all circumstances. Territorial and psychological boundaries in the household need to be set. Family members should all know and be consistent with the house rules for the puppy. Ensure the puppy's feeling of importance and satisfaction by giving him the opportunity to repay his owner by serving and pleasing. Let the pup earn his praise. Praise should be short, simple, and sincere without gushing or too much emotion. The psychological needs of the pup can be met by establishing with your dog a system of communication with consistent commands and word, which he can understand, Teach him consistent behavioral standards to enable him to better cope with his environment. Your

pup will not understand a 'holiday' from the house rules, and will become confused and insecure dealing with inconsistency. Provide training in a pleasant and straight forward way based on the concepts of mutual respect and trust.

Puppy socialization should cover most of the experiences that your dog will encounter in his adult life. Trips in the car in a crate or safety harness will be essential when traveling or taking him to the vet. Bathing, crate training, walking in the neighborhood, greeting the mailman or meter reader. If your dog will be shown in conformation, weight pulling, agility or obedience events get him out to club fun shows, and club functions. Socialization around children should be done very carefully if you do not have children in your immediate household. Dogs can get into trouble if they have not been positively socialized to children of all ages before, they are six months of age. The reason is that children smell, respond and act differently than adults. Their energy is different from adults and often times it is unstable or erratic in nature. Calm, self confident children should be selected to expose your puppies to. The children should call the puppies to them for petting and interactions. Instruct a child not to kiss or hug and to avoid picking up the puppies, chasing, or playing tug of war. A fun game for children to play with your pup is 'hide and seek'. Allow the child to hide and have the puppy find. At all times, adult supervision is required during these play sessions or socialization times with children. Dogs are not born with the knowledge of how to treat children and many children can become rough or play too hard with some pups. If at any time, the play is not fun for the child or the puppy, or becomes out of control, it needs to stop and the puppy put away. The book that I recommend to parents bringing a puppy into a household with children is Raising Puppies and Kids Together by Pai Silvani and Lynn Eckhardt, published by t.f.h. publications. This book gives great practical advice to parents and dog owners on how to facilitate a great relationship between puppies and children.

Canine behaviorists have been studying early socialization and working with

dogs whose socialization has been less than ideal, (puppy mills etc.) With many of the dogs, their behaviors and ability to learn appear to be quite deficient. The dog may exhibit distrust or even extreme fear of social contact and will appear to have behavioral disabilities. According to Steven Lindsay, in his book Handbook Of Applied Dog Behavior and Training, research has shown that some dogs suffering from inadequate socialized from puppy hood can regain some balance through intense remedial socialization, but they will never reach the full potential they could have, if adequately socialized from the start.

Want to learn more? Contact the ADBA office for references, etc at adba@adba.cc