



Photo: Ryan Brix

# Partnering for Puppies:

## Examining Socialization Problems and What We Can Do About It

By Rachel Brix, BSEd, CPDT-KA

**W**e've all heard it: "I think my dog was abused before I got her because she's afraid of everything," or a more descriptive variation: "I think my dog was abused by a man in a hat because my dog growls and hides from men in hats." Most oftentimes the problem isn't an abusive past at all, but rather lack of appropriate socialization during the critical periods of development.

Case in point: Sharon, a new client of mine, was at a disadvantage before she even went to pick up her new dogs; a trendy cross-breed Cockapoo and an "oops" litter Labrador retriever runt who was born to a momma who'd already had a litter this year. Sharon claimed her daughter, a backyard breeder, "didn't do anything to her!" as the young female Lab cowered in the corner. I told her I didn't doubt that, but rather it's more likely many other factors were at play for why the young dog was fearful of strangers, refused a collar and leash and was visibly stressed about traversing tile floors.

As trainers we know proper socialization (and a whole lot of it!) is crucial prior to the first 12-14 weeks of life. However, many of us might not see dogs until well after three months of age. Therefore, it is critical breeders provide socialization and veterinarians advocate for its importance to clients and potential dog owners since these two groups are the ones who are involved with the largest number of dogs at this vulnerable and tender age.

Here in rural Missouri, for various cultural, educational, and societal reasons, I don't typically see dogs until problems

arise in adolescence and adulthood. Early socialization and responsible pet ownership are not commonplace in these parts, and although giving up on trying isn't an option, it does feel like my head meets with a wall more often than not. Don't get me wrong; these folks love their dogs as much as anyone but suggesting how to raise them is equivalent to telling them how to vote.

Missouri is also consistently ranked by multiple sources as the state with the most puppy mills. Therefore, it's not surprising I see a tremendous number of dogs from these unfortunate situations bought by unsuspecting people who are proud they're getting a "purebred dog registered with the AKC" and/or from a "USDA-inspected kennel." Regrettably, they're often unaware AKC papers nor a USDA inspection guarantee humane rearing conditions or physical, emotional, or mental health.

In my 12 years training dogs and experiences as a shelter manager, it's painfully apparent when it comes to socialization — most people are usually either a) unaware of its critical role in healthy puppy development, b) incorrectly define it as only any and all exposure to people and other dogs or c) don't realize age matters. Pat Miller, CBCC-KA, CPDT-KA, owner of Peaceable Paws LLC, says some of her clients understand socialization, some don't, but most don't make the "fine distinction between, "[t]aking your puppy lots of places,' versus, '[t]aking your puppy lots of places and making sure she has a very good time everywhere she goes."

“Early and proper socialization is a paramount to healthy development whereas a lack of appropriate socialization can have lasting and damaging effects. Renowned dog trainer Suzanne Clothier of Carpe Canem, Inc. explains, “the fear of novelty period starts roughly at 4-5 weeks and hits a peak at 9 weeks. The window for foundation socialization and introduction of novel items, experiences and social interactions begins to close, and by 20 weeks...what the puppy knows or doesn’t know will affect his ability to learn for the rest of his life.”

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Most important are breeders, who have not only the best opportunity, but also the biggest responsibility for socializing puppies; and overall they aren’t measuring up. Additionally, far too many veterinarians recommend puppies have completed all their vaccinations prior to not only attending classes, but sometimes even prior to going out at all; and a range of unfortunate advice in between. Finally, trainers, who oftentimes don’t see puppies until at least 8 weeks of age when roughly half of the critical period has already elapsed, need to be doing more by way of education and advocacy.

### First line of defense: Breeders

Everyone seems to agree breeders must be responsible for implementing appropriate socialization. Michael Shikashio,

CDBC, of Complete Canines, LLC, explains breeders are especially responsible since “[t]hey’re the ones with access to the dogs before 8 weeks of age, before they go out into homes. And that’s a lot of time for development of really important social skills.” Clothier further emphasizes, “Appleby, Plujimakers et al proposed that the emotional homeostasis (balance between sympathetic and parasympathetic) may be set by 5 weeks of age. This means the breeder has a huge responsibility to provide the kind of enriched, safe environment that promotes brain development that is desired...All of that happens prior to 7-8 weeks.”

Clothier, whose Enriched Puppy Program has helped raise thousands of guide and service puppies and several generations of German Shepherd Dogs says, “early puppyhood development is a major step in producing dogs who are not anxious, reactive, hyper aroused and all the other fun stuff that goes along with an impoverished puppyhood. Sadly, many breeders who would fit the bill of being ‘good breeders’ because they feed well, vaccinate knowledgeably, breed carefully with genetic screenings, take dogs back for their lifetime, and have titles to show — sadly, all that can be true and they can still be shockingly ignorant of behavioral health or what it takes to raise a litter well prepared for life.”

And according to Miller, “only a small percentage of breeders truly understand and implement a well-developed socialization program. [They] need to do much more to expose their puppies to a comprehensive program that includes exposure to a variety of humans, other animals, surfaces, objects, sounds and experiences before they are sent off to their new homes.”

Breeders, whether commercial, backyard, professional or hobby account for a tremendous amount of the puppies who end up in homes. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) list of Active Licensed Dog Breeders for 2020, there are approximately 2,000 commercial breeders, with more than half of those being in just two states: Missouri (723) and Indiana (328). However, the Humane Society of the United States estimates there are more than 10,000 puppy mills in the U.S. Puppy mills are licensed or unlicensed large-scale commercial breeding operations where the health and well-being of the dogs, especially the breeding dogs, is severely compromised for the sake of optimizing profits. Then we have to factor in other breeders who may not fit the definition of puppy mill, but are breeders who typically aren’t licensed, such as backyard breeders who are generally considered to be amateur breeders whose efforts are often misguided, resulting in poor planning for selective breeding. And depending on which state they’re in and the quantity of dogs they produce, professional and hobby breeders are often not required to be licensed.

Ultimately, breeding, for the most part, remains largely unregulated mainly due to dogs’ longtime and continued status in the U.S. as personal property. There are no modern comprehensive standards for care, much less proper socialization, as guidelines



The author Rachel Brix encourages and waits patiently for Talula to choose whether or not she will engage the Klimb.

for animal care are still defined by the antiquated Animal Welfare Act of 1966 (AWA). And the AWA has the reputation of being inadequately enforced by the USDA mainly due to the large number of animal-related enterprises and too few inspectors.

Although the government agency's website mentions socialization, it severely minimizes its importance, succinctly stating: "[s]ocialization is not a requirement under the Animal Welfare Act (AWA) standards and regulations." And instead of providing any clear, usable information on providing proper socialization, the USDA simply offers, "It is good for the puppies, good for the future owners of these pets and good for the kennel industry...[y]our Animal Care Inspector can provide information on how to develop socialization programs that can be good for your business" accentuating not health of the puppies, but rather industry and profit. Moreover, the qualifications of USDA inspectors to provide such information is in question.

Perhaps most frustrating and even saddest of all, the USDA further undermines the importance of puppy socialization by flat out stating: "USDA Inspectors will never write a citation for 'improper socialization,'" arguably giving breeders a free pass on completely opting out of a vital component for a healthy life.

According to Miller's "Traits of Responsible, Ethical Breeders" (and complementary "Traits of Responsible, Ethical Shelters and Rescues") in her August 2020 *Whole Dog Journal* article "Adopt or Shop," she outlines more than a dozen desirable characteristics that define a "responsible breeder." While her list is reasonable, doable and even preferable, Miller laments, "most don't even come close."

To sum up, most breeders aren't providing enough vital early and proper socialization and aren't legally compelled — or even encouraged — to do so. Therefore, if those who aren't providing appropriate socialization can continue make money while following the law, why would they put forth the extra effort?

Pat Miller's experiences have her "quite disturbed by the significant increase in under-socialized dogs that I have seen over the 24 years of Peaceable Paws' existence. It's not just breeders and veterinarians. I believe there are several reasons for the increase, including the proliferation of puppy mills, the rise of the so-called no-kill movement, and the transport of dogs across the U.S. as well as the importation of street dogs from other countries. I see an alarming number of organizations adopting out under-socialized dogs with significant behavioral challenges to well-meaning humans who have no idea what they are getting themselves into."

Joanne Ometz, CPDT-KA, of The Dog Lady, has had similar experiences and surmises, “rescue groups all over the country are part of the problem because they are making some poor choices in the dogs they take in to their custody with plans to sell them to adopters and not doing their best to socialize the puppies they take on... [they] get too involved in keeping themselves viable and spend too little time thinking about what needs to happen to make a puppy a good pet or whether saddling an adopter with a dog who has issues they did not fully disclose is ethical and actually helpful to the dog or not.”

An increasing number of under-socialized and troubled dogs have found their way to me as well. Especially in the last few years, both breeder-purchased dogs and adopted shelter dogs seem to have ended up with families or individuals who, in addition to being under-socialized, are not well-suited to the humans’ lifestyles, situation or the family’s goals for having a pet dog. Some of these dogs have been returned, taken to the shelter or are working on behavior modification plans in attempts to rectify generalized anxiety, fearfulness, reactivity and aggression. It’s sad and frustrating to watch families struggle with behavior problems they aren’t prepared for, aren’t equipped to deal with long-term or simply don’t want to deal with or accept. A lot of times it seems like a lose-lose situation. Miller explains “[p]eople deserve to be able to adopt dogs and puppies who will be the normal canine companions they hope for, and who can have a reasonably fear-free quality of life. We need to help our dog-loving culture understand that we cannot — and should not — save them all, while we also strive to help puppies receive the socialization, they need to enjoy that quality of life.”

### The Role of Veterinarians

As “getting a puppy’s a great idea since I’m home because of COVID” became a thing, suddenly I had a wave of young puppies. Only then did I learn, rather unexpectedly, their vets’ recommendations were to “not be in public until at least 16 weeks of age to ensure all vaccines were given and effective against disease.” After picking my jaw up off the floor I shook it off and figured this surely must just be our ruralness. Much to my surprise – and exasperation - it’s not. Ometz and many others are having similar experiences: “There are still vets in my area who tell people not to take their puppies anywhere until they’ve had all their shots. And people who learned that years ago and still think it’s the right thing to do.”

However, advice along these lines is in direct contradiction to the recommendations of American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior (AVSAB) and even the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA). For example, AVSAB’s position statement on socialization includes: “The primary and most important time for puppy socialization is the first three months of life. During this time puppies should be exposed to as many



Rachel Brix runs a client’s dog through an obstacle course at Percy’s Playground in Eagle Rock, Missouri.

new people, animals, stimuli and environments as can be achieved safely and without causing overstimulation manifested as excessive fear, withdrawal or avoidance behavior. *For this reason, the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior believes that it should be the standard of care for puppies to receive such socialization before they are fully vaccinated. ... Behavioral issues, not infectious diseases, are the number one cause of death for dogs under three years of age*” (emphasis mine).

The final journal of the American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA) for 2019 acknowledges the perpetuation of outdated information and reports: “Despite previous recommendations regarding ‘socialization,’ a recent survey indicated only one-third of puppies were receiving exposure to people and dogs outside the home during critical periods for development. Positive and structured exposure during sensitive periods are necessary for puppies to gain life skills for their future. Additionally, the AAHA Canine and Feline Behavior Management Guidelines state that *there is no medical reason to delay puppy classes or social exposure until the vaccination series is completed as long as exposure to sick animals is prohibited, basic hygiene is practiced, and diets are high in quality*” (emphasis mine).

While the AVMA recommends “[p]uppies or kittens that are not fully vaccinated should not be exposed to unvaccinated animals or places they may have been (such as outdoor parks)” science-based education and guidance by a professional could help safe socialization still be the preferred option.

Yet despite the recommendations of the very organizations which govern their practices and ethics, many veterinarians still recommend a puppy be fully vaccinated prior to being exposed to the world. Is it possible that many veterinarians simply haven’t seen this information? Or are there other factors at play? Dog trainer Jenny Dennis of Wet Noses Dog Training surmises, “This is America, where you can sue for anything. It’s all about liability — if they recommend a puppy get out in the world and that puppy gets sick or dies, they could be liable — and whether or not they actually are, they are a small business that would ill-afford even a hint of a lawsuit aimed in their direction, in money, time, and reputation. For this reason, I think most vets will take the most conservative approach.”

Katherine Nybakken, CPDT-KA, of Karma Dog Training points out “a vet’s priority and focus is physical health, not behavior. Likewise, vets may be concerned about backlash or even worse from clients – imagine if you were the one who recommended to a patient to go out and do stuff with their pup only to have them return with the pup at death’s door a few weeks later.”

Sarah Buchanan, DVM, and I have had a positive and productive working relationship the past several years, both personally with our six pets and professionally, as she is the attending vet for our boarding and training facility. Dr. Buchanan clarifies her perspective on concerns regarding vaccinations: “In our area [northwest Arkansas/southwest Missouri], parvovirus is extremely prevalent. I’ve seen too many puppies die from this virus every year, so I strongly believe that all puppies need to be vaccinated against parvovirus [which entails] vaccinating every 2-4 weeks until they are more than 16 weeks. In the meantime, I recommend puppy socialization be limited to friends and families with pets that we know are up to date on their vaccines.”

Nybakken recently worked with a client whose vet used an effective approach to handling both concerns regarding disease in the Denver, Colorado area, and the importance of socialization. She explains her clients’ vet “not only recommended that they get out there and do everything with their pup (and how to be careful about it), [the vet] also gave statistics on the occurrences of parvo and other diseases in their county over the past five years and other data showing that the likelihood of the puppy catching something was almost nil.”

Dr. Buchanan acknowledges the critical role of veterinarians, saying, “it is our responsibility to approach the topic of

socialization with our clients. We must educate ourselves on canine behavior and stay up to date on current recommendations. We must also practice what we preach, taking our dogs to training classes and socializing our dogs to new situations so we can lead by example.”

“ But Shikashio reminds us that puppy classes must be done right, and cautions “one size doesn’t fit all. Look at body language. If we don’t look at ‘I’m not having a good time’ or ‘I need space’ a puppy class can do a lot of damage. ”

The University of Guelph in Ontario, Canada, published a study in 2018 in the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* that surveyed nearly 300 pet owners twice: once upon getting a puppy and then again when the puppy was 5 months old. The study found “only one-third of respondents provided their puppies with minimal socialization opportunities (defined as providing interaction outside the home with other dogs fewer than five times every two weeks, and with people fewer than 10 times in that period).” Also according to the study, “more than half of the respondents didn’t take their puppies to classes, resulting in pet owners who were more likely to use aversives in training and puppies who were more likely to be fearful of noise, such as vacuum cleaners and thunder, and to react fearfully to crate training.”

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Another considerable part of the problem is the lack of emphasis on behavioral education in vet school. Dr. Buchanan, who attended University of Missouri College of Veterinary Medicine, illustrates, “I am a 2013 graduate and at that time we did not even have a lecture on canine behavior. The veterinary medical education is extremely lacking in regard to teaching veterinarians about canine socialization and behavior.”

Unfortunately, the omission of behavioral education for DVM degrees seems to be the norm rather than the exception. When looking at curricula of top-ranked vet schools in the U.S.,

Colorado State does not have any behavior courses listed online for its 2020-2021 school year for the DVM curriculum, and Texas A&M's vet school neither requires nor offers as an elective any courses on behavior. Ohio State requires only one course on animal behavior for its DVM program: Introduction to Animal Behavior in the first semester. Fourth year students have limited behavioral elective options. But neither curriculum component prepares small animal vets to discuss, much less recommend, proper socialization of puppies and its importance with clients.

Dr. Karen Overall, Ph.D., MA, VMD, DACVB, CAAB explains, "Worldwide, it's exceptional that veterinary specialists in behavior are on faculty at veterinary schools, and yet the single biggest killer of pet dogs is behavior problems. People need to realize that vets don't know that much about problematic behavior, or maybe even normal behavior."

Dr. Buchanan didn't start out discussing socialization with her clients, but she does now, and also provides them with an informational handout I created in efforts to help educate pet parents on socialization. She explains, "As a new graduate, this conversation was completely absent from puppy visits and was based solely on my medical assessment. I've [since] found that owners are looking for a professional opinion on puppy training and socialization and often turn to their veterinarian for advice. I now make a point to discuss the importance of starting socialization immediately after adopting a new puppy. I suggest taking the puppy to play dates with healthy and well-vaccinated dogs and supervised play with children."

### Impact of Trainers

As unfortunate as it is painfully clear, the disconnect among vets, breeders and puppy owners regarding socialization affects an increasing number of dogs. But by the time many of us see dogs experiencing problems due to inappropriate or lack of socialization, it's well past the initial critical stages of development. So as professional dog trainers, what are we to do?

First, those of us who are fortunate enough to work with puppies as young as 8 weeks old can be prepared to effectively discuss and advocate for appropriate socialization with pet parents. And then we all can also work with their humans to help them be properly prepared for the Second Fear Impact Period, providing support and strategies to navigate potential negative experiences to help ensure they are healthy and positive. Miller suggests writing articles for local newspapers, facilitating appearances on local radio and TV shows, booths at community fairs and animal shelter fundraiser events. Since the implementation of social distancing guidelines, online seems to be the best solution for education. Reaching out to new pet parents via social media, blogs, newsletters and email is a great way to get the word out, especially with the ongoing challenges of COVID-19 going into 2021.

While many of us have offered "Before You Get Your Puppy"-type classes with limited success, perhaps we can offer a focus on customized classes, seminars and private sessions geared toward under socialized adult/adolescent dogs. And we need to be sure we're up to date on our own education and approaches for working with dogs who are fearful. One nugget of advice from Shikashio is for trainers to "grasp the concepts of desensitization and classical counterconditioning, gradual exposures, how does a dog feel about a stimulus, how they're feeling about a particular situation."

And ideally pet parents are also doing some research on their own. Miller emphasizes the importance of pet parents to be "educated as to how to manage their pup's environment to avoid creating long-lasting fear associations in addition to continuing the all-important socialization program that the breeder has (hopefully) started." Professor David Coe at the University of Guelph urges those looking to add a puppy to their family to take a proactive approach: "Ultimately people need to be thinking about socialization even before they bring a puppy home because it is something that needs to happen so early in the puppy's life."

Suzanne Clothier's ideas focus on "educat[ing] more breeders and anyone involved in raising puppies. Enriched, safe environments with age appropriate stimulation and exposure to many objects & experiences are key to creating puppies who are not fearful — genetics notwithstanding, big influence there." Shikashio concurs we have to acknowledge the role of other factors besides socialization noting, "genetics can influence behavior; also dogs [who] have propensity or their personality is to be fearful; we might expose them to environments that can be overwhelming for them...we have to be aware of overexposure, sensitization, flooding. Socialize, but do it properly."

While genetics and other factors may play a role, when asked about his aggression cases Shikashio explains they're "usually from a fear-based issue. Dogs not socialized around a particular stimulus. A novel stimulus can be very scary for some dogs who haven't been exposed enough and they become suspicious, fearful. And the response is aggression to make the scary stimulus go away."

Unfortunately, trainers and behaviorists are seeing an increasing number of dogs who are presenting fearfulness and aggression. Pat Miller describes, "[a]n increasing percentage of clients are bringing dogs to me for help with fear-related behaviors. Many of my fellow behavior professionals agree: They, too, are seeing more fearful dogs than they used to." Miller also acknowledges, "even in our group classes we see an unfortunate number of under-socialized dogs. I see a significant number of fearful dogs, and many of those, as expected, are expressing their fear as aggression."

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“ Trainers also must be leaders and active proponents of science-based education. Education raises important concerns about how to approach breeders, veterinarians and potential pet parents with regards to informing them on what they should be doing with regards to socialization. Michael Shikashio reminds us “a lot of people don’t want to be given advice they’re not asking for. Establish relationships first, that way you have credibility and then enter into that conversation.” He further points out it’s not just about socialization, but appropriate socialization by reminding “it’s not just that we’re putting the word ‘socialization’ out there, it’s good socialization, appropriate socialization ...why it’s important and what good socialization looks like.” ”

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Additionally, trainers can reach out to vets in their area regarding the importance of early socialization and present the parameters for their well-run safety-conscious puppy classes to help vets feel comfortable about making those recommendations. Dennis points out “most people don’t seek out a trainer immediately after getting a puppy, but they do seek out a vet [for puppy vaccinations], and that means the vet is the first professional voice in their ear — and that’s powerful.”

Moreover, Nybakken suggests we could provide “a resource (easily reproducible) that advises how to find and identify a safe, well-run puppy kindergarten class and/or puppy playtime. Any Joe Shmo can call him/herself a dog trainer, and there is no easy way for vets, breeders, and rescues making recommendations. . .having an easy-to-distribute handout would make it easier for them to educate new puppy parents about not only the importance of getting their pups to classes, but also how to know when one is in a safe environment.” In addition to amplifying outreach and education, we can advocate and take an active part in the legislative process becoming involved in, for example, campaigns that aim to change how breeders are regulated. Truth be told, these types of campaigns are usually long, hard fought and may not always end up prevailing for dogs. In Missouri, for example, I volunteered on one such campaign that ended in 2011 with the passage of the Canine Cruelty Prevention Act, a compromise from the original Puppy Mill Bill (Prop B) that was narrowly passed by Missouri voters but overturned by the state legislature. Given the federal government’s longtime failure to update the abysmally outdated Animal Welfare Act of 1966, advocacy at the local and state levels seems the most prudent.

We can also consider approaching organizations like the AKC to augment their resources and support of educational information. Although it’s worth noting while the AKC’s website does address some components of proper socialization, the longstanding breeder-friendly organization consistently and vociferously opposes legislation aimed at improving animal welfare, especially when it affects how breeders are regulated.

Another important goal that could be addressed at the state and local level would be to approach curriculum directors at colleges and universities with the science regarding socialization and the responsibility and golden opportunity for vets to take a leading role. However we choose to approach socialization with our clients, veterinarians, breeders or beyond, as trainers we absolutely must be part of the equation. Dogs are depending on us.



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