**Canine Handout**

**Behavior tips every practitioner should know (Proceedings)**

May 01, 2011

By [Lore Haug, DVM, DACVB](http://veterinarycalendar.dvm360.com/node/396662/) [1]

Mouthing and Bite Inhibition in Puppies

Mouthing and oral exploration are normal developmental phases in puppies (and many other species). Mouthing serves a few important functions including: environmental exploration, communication, and development of proper bite inhibition (control of mouth pressure during biting).

Owners are often inclined (or told!) to begin reprimanding young puppies for play biting immediately. Some of these interventions are quite detrimental to the owner-puppy bond and may actually increase the likelihood of the puppy becoming truly aggressive.

When puppies with sharp deciduous teeth play with each other, they "shape" each other over time to develop a high degree of control over the direction and force of their "bites." If one puppy bites too hard on another, the victim generally yelps or cries out and then withdraws for a short period of time (this may only be a few seconds) from the game. This short "time out" is an effective punisher for excessive mouth pressure as playing is highly reinforcing for most puppies.

Mouthing often becomes a big issue in older puppies (12-20 weeks of age) because people make a big issue of it! While we don't *encourage* puppies to mouth, they can be allowed to gently and calmly mouth on humans hands for short periods. If the puppy begins to mouth forcefully or in an excited manner, owners should merely withdrawal their hands and withhold attention from the puppy for a few seconds. "Natural" reactions are more effective reprimands — i.e. if the puppy bites down suddenly, most people are going to cry out and yank their hand away (just like another puppy). What the owner should NOT do is then retaliate against the puppy (see below). If one puppy attacked another puppy after being mouthed too hard, then every instance of this during play would lead to a fight and defeat the purpose of bite inhibition.

Things owners can do to discourage excessive mouthing:   
     1. Provide adequate toys and encourage the puppy to direct biting to those. If the puppy becomes too mouthy, give the puppy a short time out (ignore for a few seconds) and then redirect the puppy to a toy.   
     2. Provide adequate mental stimulation in the form of enrichment games and training.   
     3. Teach puppies to "sit" on cue early (using positive reinforcement) so the owner has a desirable behavioral outlet to provide the puppy's need for attention and reinforcement.   
     4. Use confinement as needed to aid training. Train puppies on leash or on tethers so the owner can step just far enough away from the puppy that he/she does not inadvertently reinforce the puppy for biting (e.g. by pushing at the puppy with his/her hands).   
     5. Keep play sessions within an acceptable level of excitement – i.e. the puppy can calm down quickly if the owner stops playing. Also the puppy should be able to stay focused on the initial toy or game. If the puppy's excitement starts uncontrollably "bleeding out" to other nearby things (household items, the owner's body or clothes), then the owner should stop the play session.   
     6. Enroll the puppy in a good puppy class prior to 14 weeks age so that owners can learn appropriate intervention techniques.

Petting is an elective interaction — ask first!

People and animals often come in conflict with each other when humans force physical contact upon an animal. Nowhere is this more evident than in petting and physical handling. A significant number dog and cat bites result because an approaching human petted the animal without the animal's permission. Biting generally occurs because a person did not observe or denied the animal's polite, non-aggressive request to halt physical contact. If the animal learns that non-aggressive cut off signals (walking away, turning head away, lip licking, freezing, etc.) are ineffective, then stronger messages are delivered (growling, snapping, biting). These typically are quite effective in obtaining the desired outcome resulting in a habitually biting dog (or cat).

Socialization should not be postponed until vaccinations are complete!

Proper socialization is likely the single most crucial aspect of a young animal's life. Improper or insufficient socialization sets the platform for the development of a host of annoying and potentially dangerous behavior problems.

The sensitive socialization period is from 3-9 weeks in kittens and 3 – 12 (some references will report up to 16) weeks of age in puppies. After this time frame, fear of novel stimuli begins to occur and young animals become wary of approaching or interacting with strange things. Socialization after this time point becomes dramatically more difficult and time consuming.

Veterinarians can do puppy owners no greater behavioral disserve than to inform them to keep their puppies home and away from other dogs until after they are 16-20 weeks of age, when vaccinations are complete. Rather encourage puppy owners to begin exposing their puppies to a variety of places, sounds, and people. Additionally puppies should have direct interaction with other healthy puppies and dogs. Owners certainly should avoid areas of high risk for dieses transmission (e.g. dog parks). A well run puppy class can be invaluable.

The 5 rules of puppy housetraining

Housetraining does not have to be a headache, but it does require that owners consistently observe a few simple rules. These include:   
     1. Keep the puppy appropriately supervised or confined at all times. When the puppy is out of its confinement area, the owner must have the puppy within direct sight at all times. Each time the puppy is able to relieve itself inside the house, it is reinforced for doing so (by relief of pressure on bowels or bladder).   
     2. Take the puppy outside to the potty area frequently. For young puppies, this may be as often as every 2 hours during the day. The owner should accompany the puppy outside to ensure that the puppy actually eliminates and to be able to provide prompt reinforcement for eliminating in the appropriate area.   
     3. Reward the puppy *outside* at the completion of the elimination. If the owner rewards the puppy after it comes back inside, the owner will merely train the puppy to want to come quickly back inside the house – not eliminate outside.   
     4. Do NOT punish (or "correct") the puppy for having an accident inside the house. (If the puppy has an accident in the house, it's due to lack of diligence on the owner's part.) If the owner catches the puppy in the act of eliminating, the owner can make a short interrupter sound and then take the puppy outside immediately. Scolding the puppy after the fact is not only ineffective, but may be counterproductive in the long run.

Why environmental enrichment is crucial to behavioral health

Animals have taken a family role in the last few decades (as compared to a more utilitarian role in the past). This has mixed consequences for our animals. While their physical health has improved with these changes, the changes are not always beneficial in terms of their behavioral health. Pets spend more time indoors and families have busier schedules. In all honesty, this means that our pets now live in fancy prisons. Their options for engaging in normal behaviors are markedly curtailed. Dogs are walked when it is convenient, and only the most dedicated cat owners make any attempt to engage their cats in some form of structured physical activity. Our pets are going stir crazy!

Environmental enrichment can go a long way toward salvaging our pets' sanity. Species appropriate enrichment activities allow pets to engage in *functionally normal behaviors*. The more time allocated to normal behavior, the less likely they are to engage in undesirable or abnormal behavior patterns.

Enrichment can encompass several modalities:   
     • Feeding/foraging   
     • Olfactory stimulation (novel environmental odors)   
     • Tactile stimulation   
     • Visual stimulation (e.g. bird feeders, Videos, etc)   
     • Locomotor (play, species/breed specific behaviors)

Toys are a vital aspect of enrichment. Toys should not be removed because the animal tries to destroy them. This is akin to taking away a child's book because the child tries to read it! Distinctions should be made between play toys and chew toys; both forms should be provided.

Easing the transition for newly adopted puppies

Two of the most important factors for reducing stress during puppy adoption include choosing a puppy from a litter with good perinatal care and bringing the puppy home at the right age. Puppies should never be separated from their littermates or dams under 7-8 weeks of age. Even if the litter was orphaned, the puppies should be kept together as a cohesive litter until the puppies are 8 weeks of age.

Bring the new puppy home during a time when the family environment is relatively quiet and the owner has a few days to spend time helping the puppy adjust to the new home. It is undesirable to bring a new puppy home during holidays and family gatherings. The process of being separated from the natal home, dam and littermates is traumatic in the best of circumstances. Taking the puppy from this environment into a busy, chaotic, or hectic environment could have persisting deleterious effects on the puppy's behavioral health.

The bed or crate should be set up in a quiet area of the house to allow the puppy adequate sleep. A large stuffed toy scented by the littermates, a hot water bottle, or the CD Canine Lullabies can assist in soothing the puppy during the first few nights. Additionally the Dog Appeasing Pheromone collar has been shown to reduce stress (house soiling and vocalization) in newly adopted puppies.

The puppy should be allowed to explore the home, adapt to the new environment, and begin establishing a bond with the owner for several days at minimum before being exposed to visitors or trips to other locations.

Nutritional weaning versus psychological weaning

It is common practice for inexperienced or low grade breeders to sell puppies at 5-6 weeks of age. This is often done to reduce work load on the litter owner as the older the puppies become, the more time and money has to be invested in them. The criterion for weaning age in companion animals has been based on the age at which they consistently eat solid food on their own. This approach is incomplete and detrimental to the animals' long term behavioral health. There is more to weaning than food.

Weaning is a slow gradual process in most species, including humans. In natural settings, animals are weaned at ages much older than those we impose upon them in artificial environments. This weaning process takes into account psychological parameters as well. Animals continue to nurse for weeks to months after they begin eating solid food because suckling is both a nutritional and psychological behavior.

Most children are capable of making a meal for themselves (although perhaps messily!) by 3-5 years of age. We would never dream of kicking them out of the house at this age however, because eating solid food does not equate to being ready to be on your own.

In a natural setting, kittens will be eating solid food and even catching small prey by 5-7 weeks of age. However, they will not leave their natal unit until they are over 6 months of age. Similarly, puppies may be eating on their own by 5-6 weeks of age, but they will not voluntarily and permanently leave the litter often until 8-12 months of age.

There is a broad consensus that "early weaning" – under 7 weeks in dogs and cats – increases the risk of behavior problems in our companion animals. Puppies and kittens should remain with the dam and littermates until at least 7 weeks of age. If the breeder does an excellent job of socializing the litter while in his/her care, then puppies and kittens can benefit from even more time in contact with their natal unit.

Expose puppies (and kittens?) to desensitization tapes for storm/firework tapes when they are young

As part of the socialization process, young puppies and kittens can be exposed to noise desensitization tapes to help acclimate them to these sounds. This often reduces the risk of the animal developing a noise phobia to those sounds in the future.

**Source URL:** <http://veterinarycalendar.dvm360.com/behavior-tips-every-practitioner-should-know-proceedings>