



Your new puppy has a lot to learn

Well before you welcomed your new puppy into your home, it will have been reaching and passing important learning milestones. This learning continues at an amazing pace as your puppy transitions into its new family, lifestyle and environment.

Although dogs continue to learn throughout their life, those early learning opportunities (or lack of them) can have a much more significant impact on their adult temperament, and their ability to cope in different situations.

Early learning

Learning takes place from the minute your puppy is born. In fact, there are types of learning that occur even before a puppy is born, whilst they are still developing in their mother's womb.

In the first few weeks of life, the learning priorities relate highly to survival – warmth, food, physical comfort. Your puppy's world is very small, but expanding every day.

As their senses develop and as soon as their eyes and ears have opened, your puppy will begin learning what is 'normal' in its world. As they become more mobile, they explore and interact with everything in their environment. This is the start of a critical learning time called the '**socialisation period**'.

Many people think of socialisation as having puppies interact with each other – meeting dogs of different breeds and having a play. However, socialisation is much more than this. Every experience a puppy has provides information about the world around them – sights, sounds, scents, textures – and forms part of this important period in life.

Your breeder will have spent lots of time handling and holding each puppy. Their daily examinations would have seen your puppy's mouth, ears, tails, feet and belly touched gently. They will have trimmed their toenails and introduced your puppy to being bathed and groomed – all things that will become part of daily life.

They will have tried to give the litter opportunities to experience different things – a ride in the car, visitors, children, other animals, different floor surfaces, activities, different foods; the list of possibilities are endless!

Some breeders will have also started some basic manners training – teaching sit, down, come and given your puppy a basic introduction to walking on a leash. They may have even started crate training and toilet training, and given each puppy short periods of 'alone-time' away from their mother and siblings.

Now it is up to you to take on the role of puppy educator, making sure you continue what the breeder has started, and provide the learning opportunities into the next phase. That way, you are setting your new pup up to be a well-rounded, calm and happy adult.

Continuing your puppy's socialisation

Scientists have shown that there is a window of time, from approximately three weeks to 3-4 months of age, in which young puppies are particularly open to new experiences. At this age, they are naturally very curious and tend to explore and interact with their world with a relatively low level of fear.

Socialisation involves exposure to people (people of different ages, children, people with hats, people with beards, people with high voices, people with deep voices), exposure to different sights and sounds, places, and animals of all kinds. Your puppy will 'absorb' all of these experiences and, as long as they have not been unpleasant, will categorise them as 'normal'.

This is an age where they learn how to interact with others – people, dogs, cats, etc., and learn appropriate manners and communication skills. Like young children, they have to learn what is appropriate behaviour and what is not in different contexts and environments.

If puppies are deprived of these learning opportunities, they may not develop the skills to interact well as a mature animal. They will also be more likely to be fearful or at least suspicious of, situations, sounds or individuals when they first experience them as an adult.



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So the goal as a new puppy owner is to provide plenty of positive experiences early on without overwhelming the puppy. The flip side of this is that negative experiences at this early age, can lead to life-long fears, so care has to be taken to minimise any negative interactions.

Puppy class

A great place to start your puppy's training is to enrol in a good quality puppy class. Many vet clinics run a puppy class at their clinic, and if they don't, they will be able to recommend somewhere local to you that runs a good class.

Because the puppies will not be fully vaccinated, puppy classes are usually held indoors, in an area that can be easily disinfected to help minimise the risk of exposure to disease.

Puppy class usually runs for 3-5 weeks, and provides an excellent opportunity for you to learn all about being a responsible dog owner, how to train your puppy some basic behaviours, and also how to address common problems seen in young puppies as they grow – mouthing, chewing, issues with toilet training etc. There are usually sessions on grooming and health care, diet and exercise, as well as time to answer questions specific to your puppy.

Important!

Although there is the excitement of other people and puppies, puppy classes should not be a free-for-all. It is super important that every puppy has a good experience and is not bullied or hurt by the rough play of others.

Avoid puppy classes where there are more than 5 or 6 puppies in the class, or where the puppies are off-leash the entire time. Although it might not seem as exciting to have the puppies on the leash for most of the class, one of the most important things puppies learn at puppy class is to be calm in the presence of other dogs and to pay attention to you even though there might be a lot going on.

If your puppy is a little bit older or has completed puppy class, you may want to look for a 'beginner' or 'juvenile' training class in your area. Even if you do not want military precision, some basic manners training at this age is very important and makes life with your dog so much more enjoyable.

Ask your veterinarian or puppy class instructor for a recommendation, or find a Dogs Victoria Affiliated Training/Obedience Club near you by visiting our website.

Toilet training

Having a dog that can be in the house and part of the family is the goal of most pet owners and means the dog is not just 'out in the yard' all day on its own. This has benefits for both the dog and the family!

Unfortunately, if the dog is not toilet trained, it soon wears out its welcome inside the house. So this has to be your number one training priority when your puppy first comes home.

There are a few keys to toilet training a puppy. First is a solid routine – what goes in on time, comes out on time. Second is having the puppy in a pen or crate in the house if you are not directly supervising it – that way there will be no chance of the puppy wandering about the house needing to toilet and using a spot on the rug or behind the couch because they cannot get to their regular toileting area.

Just as you would not yell at or punish a young child for not making it to the toilet, if your puppy messes in the house you should never hit it, rub its nose in the mess, or yell at it – instead you need to think about how you might have prevented the mistake from occurring!

Dogs Victoria has a fact sheet on the topic of toilet training your puppy, so if you need some tips and advice, visit our website which has an entire section dedicated to new puppies.





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Handling and grooming

All dogs, regardless of coat type, will need some regular grooming throughout their life and all dogs need to learn to accept gentle handling all over their bodies whilst remaining fairly still. Now is the perfect time to start getting them used to this in a positive way – well before you need to trim their nails, or dose them with a tablet.

Ideally, a couple of times each week, you should grab a few treats and dedicate a few minutes to training handling and grooming behaviours. This may include rewarding your puppy as you gently touch its lips or mouth, rewarding it as you touch or lift a foot, rewarding it as you run a brush gently over its body, rewarding it as you touch its tail, or even rewarding it for calmly allowing you to hold its collar. These sessions can be quite short – half a dozen treats and the session ends on a positive note.

Your puppy class instructor will most likely include this type of training in your puppy class sessions, so it is a great place to check if you are rewarding the right thing, and to ask any questions you might have.

If your breed is one that requires regular trimming, you may also want to have a couple of short trips to the groomers, where your puppy can have a positive experience without the need for a full grooming session, and the groomer can get the puppy used to the sights and sounds of the equipment used.

Learning to be alone

There are going to be times that your puppy is going to be alone – maybe during the day when you are at work or school, when you head out to the shops, or when you go out on the weekend.

All puppies need to learn to be alone, even if they usually live with other pets or if you currently are working from home. By gradually getting them used to entertaining themselves whilst you are away, you are setting them up for long-term success.

As a group living animal, it is not 'normal' for dogs to be totally alone, and for some individuals, it can be a very stressful time. When your puppy makes the move to its new home, it will most likely be the first time it has been away from the company of its littermates and mother.

Most people spend a lot of time with their new puppy in the first few days – some even taking time off work to give them the opportunity to help their puppy settle in. But it is not long before things go back to normal, so you need to start 'alone time' training from the day your puppy arrives.

The best way to start is to have the puppy spend short periods of time in its pen or crate, or outside in the yard, with people nearby but not in sight. To set the puppy up for success, this is an excellent time for it to have a chew toy stuffed with some food. That way, the puppy is so busy, it does not really notice that it is alone, and the people return before it is finished chewing.

Provided the puppy shows no signs of distress; these sessions can gradually get longer. Remember it is important to keep an eye on the puppy early days so that you know when to return – the aim is for the puppy to be calm and entertained and not wait until it realises it is alone and starts crying.

If you have other pets, make sure they get used to time away from each other – maybe take your older dog for a walk on its own and have the puppy stay at home.

This means the puppy will not come to depend on the company of the older dog and will have some level of independence. This will be important if the older dog has to spend time at the vets, or later in life if the older dog passes away and your puppy becomes an 'only dog'.

