



# Starting Blocks

In the eyes of the Australian public, the ideal dog is obedient, friendly, affectionate, house-trained and safe with children.<sup>1</sup> What is needed to set dogs up to meet this ideal?

### Unfit for the Task

Frequently in contemporary Western societies, rather than hunting or herding, a dog’s work is as a companion, with development of a strong relationship with their owner a crucial function of the job.<sup>1</sup> This relationship can fail to develop or break down in the face of undesirable behaviours, leading to relinquishment of dogs to shelters.<sup>1</sup> Sadly, more dogs under the age of three are euthanised due to behaviour problems than for health problems or accidents.<sup>2</sup> Apart from organic problems, problems with behaviour in companion animals often stem from disregard of an animal’s biological and sociopsychological needs, inappropriate expectations of the owners or incorrect interactive behaviour.<sup>3</sup> The veterinary profession is vitally important in informing owners about animal behaviour, as well as preventive health care, but only 25% of dog owners report receiving behavioural advice from their veterinarian.<sup>4,1,5</sup>

### Expectations and Education

An owner’s level of attachment is influenced by any discrepancy between their expectations of an ideal pet and the pet they own.<sup>3</sup> This can be affected by their previous experiences and is dictated by investment, bonding, expectations and sociodemographic data.<sup>6</sup> Many dog owners think their dogs are cognitively capable of more than what has been demonstrated in empirical research studies, and believe that their dogs ‘know better’, reflecting the reality that many dog owners are not aware of normal puppy or adult dog behaviour.<sup>1</sup>

Contrary to the expectations of many owners, behaviour within the human environment is not instinctive to a dog, and so appropriate education is necessary.<sup>3</sup> When considering what and how dogs are provided with information, it may be useful to distinguish between educating, teaching, and training, which are often used interchangeably, but have subtle differences seen in their Latin roots.<sup>3</sup> Education (to ‘mold’) is upbringing, like that of a child within a family nucleus, to build the dog’s character and providing the basic information needed to ensure a good bond.<sup>3</sup> Teaching (to ‘point out’) is how a dog receives knowledge useful for everyday life, including basic obedience commands, and can be likened to schooling children.<sup>3</sup> Finally, training (to ‘instruct’) is



preparation for tasks necessary and specific to a career like livestock herding or seeing eye dog duties.<sup>3</sup> These facets of information need to be addressed to adequately equip dogs for their companionship role and modern life.

Owner education has been studied as a tool to prevent onset of undesirable behaviours in adult dogs.<sup>3</sup> In a controlled study, one group of puppy owners at their first puppy consult spent an additional hour with a veterinary behaviourist, receiving information on behavioural development, building connection and attachment, canine communication, play and enrichment, and leadership without force.<sup>3</sup> Owners were given support with basic training, types of reinforcement and punishment, conditioning, socialisation programs, house-training and habituation to being home alone, while the control group did not receive this additional support.<sup>3</sup>

When owners were interviewed at the time of their one-year booster vaccination visit, the experimental group used reinforcement and punishment more appropriately, understood the importance of socialisation, implemented a leadership without force program, and did not involuntarily



reward their animal’s undesirable behaviours.<sup>3</sup> The dogs were reported to display less inappropriate elimination, aggression directed toward unknown people or dogs, and mouthing/mounting their owners compared to controls, demonstrating the positive impact of behavioural counselling to prevent undesirable behaviours.<sup>3</sup>

### Selection, Socialisation, Stimulation

Veterinary behaviour specialist Dr Kersti Seksel identifies three key areas in prevention of undesirable behaviours in pets; selection, socialisation and stimulation.<sup>4</sup>

Prevention of undesirable behaviours begins with husbandry during the puppy’s life even prior to purchase.<sup>7</sup> Early separation of a puppy from its mother and littermates is a husbandry strategy affecting development of social and environmental behaviour patterns, that may increase the

animal’s chances of exhibiting problematic behaviours as an adult.<sup>7</sup> A study has found that dogs purchased from a pet shop as puppies (in Europe, where premature separation of puppies from their litter often occurs) were twice as likely to display owner-directed aggression than those purchased directly from a breeder.<sup>7</sup>

Owner selection of a suitable pet is critical, with consideration for factors such as physical characteristics, temperament, owner lifestyle/expectations and personal preferences.<sup>4</sup>

Socialisation is the term used for the process by which individuals learn and perform behaviours expected of them by society.<sup>4</sup> Lack of socialisation shown by inappropriate responses to people or other animals is one of the many issues that lead to abandonment of pets.<sup>4</sup> Dogs enter a socialisation period from the end of the neonatal period to 12-14 weeks of age, though the effective period can be significantly shorter.<sup>7</sup> During the period, social experiences and stimuli have a greater effect on development of social and environmental behaviour patterns including those associated with learning, defining a dog’s temperament and behaviour in later life.<sup>7</sup>

Socialisation in companion dogs refers to the process of desensitisation, gradually exposing a puppy to new experiences, animals, and objects it is likely to encounter over the course of its life while ensuring the puppy finds this exposure pleasant.<sup>1</sup> This should also include exposure to sounds, textures and animal species it will likely encounter in its life, as well as humans of varying ages, sexes and races.<sup>1</sup> It is likely that breeding for specific traits does influence ideal socialisation practices and amounts, and so efforts should be made to tailor experiences to the individual’s confidence level, with a focus on quality, not quantity.<sup>1,2</sup> There is the potential for socialisation to turn into flooding, which should be avoided.<sup>2</sup> Socialisation continues outside of the sensitive period, with some recommendations that adolescent dogs continue to meet and interact with at least three unfamiliar people and three unfamiliar dogs a day until they are three years old to remain socialised.<sup>8</sup>

All animals need to be provided with a complex, stimulating environment that allows them to carry out activities and gives them choices, both physically and psychologically.<sup>4</sup> This is especially important for animals that are confined, whether to a backyard or an apartment, as they are often under-stimulated because choices are not available or because the choices are made for them.<sup>4</sup> When such stimulation is not available, pets may develop problem behaviours to gain attention or look for other stimulation.<sup>4</sup> Dogs are a social species and need regular interaction with others, whether with other dogs or with their owners. Dogs benefit greatly from training, off-lead exercise, agility training, interactive play with owners and other dogs, and toys.<sup>4</sup> Foraging devices can also provide hours of entertainment and exercise the dog’s mind as well as its body.<sup>4</sup>

**References:** 1. Kogan, L., Currin-McCulloch, J., Bussolari, C., Packman, W., & Erdman, P. (2021). The Psychosocial Influence of Companion Animals on Positive and Negative Affect during the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Animals*, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani11072084>. 2. Packer, R., Brand, C., Belshaw, Z., Pegram, C., Stevens, K., & O'Neill, D. (2021). Pandemic Puppies: Characterising Motivations and Behaviours of UK Owners Who Purchased Puppies during the 2020 COVID-19 Pandemic. *Animals*, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani11092500>. 3. Sietto, C. (2021). Societal interest in puppies and the Covid-19 pandemic: A google trends analysis. *Preventive Veterinary Medicine*, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.prevetmed.2021.105496>. 4. Oliva, J., & Johnston, K. (2021). Puppy love in the time of Corona: Dog ownership protects against loneliness for those living alone during the COVID-19 lockdown. *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, 232-242. 5. Waters, A. (2021). Pandemic puppy phenomenon is a reality. *Vet Record*, 164. 6. Brand, C., O'Neill, D., Belshaw, Z., Pegram, C., Stevens, K., & Packer, R. (2022). Pandemic Puppies: Demographic Characteristics, Health and Early Life Experiences of Puppies Acquired during the 2020 Phase of the COVID-19 Pandemic in the UK. *Animals*, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani12050629>. 7. Habarth-Morales, T., Rios-Diaz, A., & Caterson, E. (2022). Pandemic Puppies: Man's Best Friend or Public Health Problem? A Multidatabase Study. *Journal of Surgical Research*, 203-207.