

The Puppy Cure

Dog ownership has been described as a 'social buffer' for psychological distress and loneliness.¹ As uncertainty, social isolation and anxiety climbed during the pandemic, an uptick in demand for puppies has been observed at home and abroad.² Pure Animal examines potential pitfalls of pandemic puppy purchases back then and now.

The Stage is Set

Owning a dog has a positive impact on mental and physical functioning in times of hardship.^{3,4} Attachment theory recognises that the bonds between individuals and companion animals provide security, safety and decreased loneliness, and research supports that these bonds are comparable, in some ways, to human-human attachment.¹ Stressors created in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic saw communities across the globe experiencing soaring rates of anxiety, depression, loneliness and post-traumatic stress.¹ Due to quarantine guidelines, support from family, friends and co-workers diminished, and other activities that nurture coping tendencies were halted.¹ As life satisfaction and happiness decreased, puppies were purchased to mitigate some of these mental health challenges.²

In April and May 2020, interest in dog ownership increased internationally.² Google trends analysis in Australia showed an exponential increase in searches for puppies starting in the final week of March through to the end of September, correlating with implementation of strictest government policies from August through to mid-September.³ Australia was among the top countries with an observed popularity in internet-based pet

adoption enquiries along the United States, Singapore, Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, with over two million Australia households acquiring a pet during the pandemic.³ A UK study on the pandemic puppy phenomenon found that two out of five puppies purchased were influenced by the pandemic, as owners wanted 'something happy to focus on' during lockdown restrictions, and were driven by a need to improve mental health and increase exercise levels.⁵



A Vulnerable Population

In the UK, there are concerns that the high demand for puppies may have exhausted supply from good welfare sources.² Prospective puppy buyers would therefore be pushed towards purchasing from unscrupulous sellers hoping to 'cash in' on the phenomenon by producing large numbers of puppies under inadequate welfare conditions, including puppy farms and illegal importation.² Surveys of pandemic puppy owners reflect a suboptimal purchase process, with 25% of puppies obtained at less than 8 weeks of age, 8.1% obtained without viewing the mother, 15.7% of owners carried out no pre-purchase research, 25% of owners purchased puppies on first visit, and almost 50% of the owners did not request health records for either of the puppy's parents.² Phenotypic screening (hips, elbows, knees, eyes, respiratory testing) and genetic testing are critical for improving the health and welfare of future generations of dogs, and failing to request health records may reduce the priority placed on health by breeders, by reducing demand for healthy, tested dogs.²



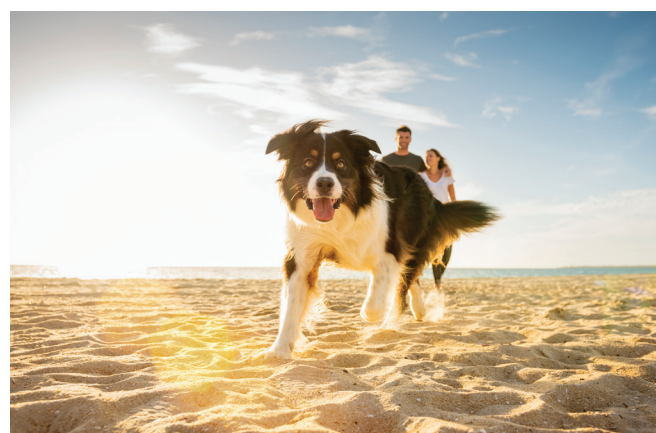
Due to pandemic related constraints, the early life experiences of this puppy population differed from pre-pandemic times.⁶ In the UK, only half of the puppies purchased during this period attended any formal puppy training class, and were far less likely to have experienced visitors to the household compared to puppies purchased prior to the pandemic.⁶ During such a sensitive period of emotional and behavioural development, insufficient socialisation is concerning, as limited exposure to a range of experiences between 7-16 weeks can increase the probability of non-social fear such as noise phobia, and social fearfulness of other dogs and strangers.⁶ Separation related behaviours are more likely to be seen in pandemic puppies since they were unlikely to have been left alone for significant periods of time.⁶ A report by the UK's leading vet charity in 2021 indicated 27% of dogs acquired since March 2020 displayed behaviours related to a deficit in socialisation and 18% of these dogs were displaying signs of stress when left alone.⁶ The risk of future behavioural issues in this cohort is great, and since undesirable behaviours are

one of the main drivers for relinquishment of dogs under three years of age, places them at increased risk of relinquishment and euthanasia.⁶

Internationally, it is recognised in literature that abandonment and relinquishment of dogs is due to a number of key factors; the pet owners' lack of understanding of the financial/time commitment, changes in lifestyle and dog behavioural issues.³ The highest risk of relinquishment occurs with first time dog owners.⁶ Two out of five pandemic puppy owners are first time dog owners, compared to one in three in 2019, highlighting a relative lack of experience.² It is concerning that various centres in the United States are reporting an increased incidence of dog bite injuries which predominate in paediatric populations, likely due to an increase in canine adoptions, remote learning and psychosocial stressors induced by lockdowns.⁷ Urgent education is needed to raise awareness of the risk of dog bites risk children and promote safe interactions with dogs within and outside the household.² Many owners will need a lot of support to understand normal dog behaviour and ensure their households are safe.⁵

A Part to Play

Given this relatively inexperienced demographic of puppy owners, provision of increased support and education of pandemic puppy owners is likely to be required by canine behaviour and welfare professionals to maintain the welfare of this vulnerable puppy population.² Concerns for this population of dogs in the medium term include the onset of clinical signs from inherited diseases in adult life.⁵ Given the relative inexperience of this cohort of dog owners it is important that owners are aware of signs of disease that may be prevalent in the breed or crossbreed they own, and vigilant for emerging potential health problems.⁵ Separation related behaviour problems should be monitored in this population and careful exposure to alone-time emphasised to owners as restrictions ease.⁶ Greater support from animal welfare organisations, veterinary professionals and animal behaviour professionals will be required, to avoid, where possible, and address, where present, negative welfare outcomes likely to occur in this population.²



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