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Ask the Dog Trainer: Puppies need to develop social skills

Cissy Sumner, a member of the Treasure Coast community. This story is neither endorsed by nor affiliated with this site.

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VERO BEACH — According to Dr. Ian Dunbar, veterinarian and father of reward-based puppy training, early puppy socialization is an inoculation against aggression.

If you think about it, many dogs that enter rescues and shelters are there due to behavioral issues. Early socialization can prevent many of these problems from arising and quite possibly save lives.

Puppies are most open to new experiences such as different people, sounds and textures, before they are 16 weeks of age. Some recent studies suggest the social window closes even earlier than that. Most veterinarians caution you about allowing your puppy to go to many public places until their vaccinations are complete.

Unfortunately, that is usually about 16 weeks of age. So, just about the time your puppy has completed its shots and deemed ready for the world, the prime social time is ending.

In order to take advantage of the social window and follow your vets advice, you need to be creative. One simple thing to do is have the people come to you. Have a puppy party. Invite dog loving friends over to meet the new pup. Let your puppy approach your guests at its own speed. Involve lots of food rewards and toys.

My guess is you, your puppy and your friends will love it. This gives your pup exposure to new and different people in the familiar home environment. This creates confidence and gives your dog a history of pleasant human interactions.

Meeting other dogs is more problematic. No dog parks for baby puppies. If you have friends with nice, puppy tolerant adult dogs, you can arrange for a play date. It is important that the pups dog experiences are positive. Be sure the canine friend you find really loves puppies. Play dates are also good if you know other puppy owners. That doesn't happen all that often.

I have found most puppies regardless of breed play well together up until about 4

months of age. Because puppies learn so much from each other, and socialization is so important, on the first Thursday of every month, I have a one hour puppy play date at 6 p.m. at Village Pet Clinic on 12th Street. This fun filled class features puppy interactions, some basic training and all important house training information.

A clean controlled environment helps take the worry out of way. Dr. Carlos Basabe will be on hand to answer veterinary questions. I will be there as well, supervising and educating so you can get your pup of to a great start. Give your dog the most important vaccination, the one against aggression.

Cissy Sumner of Best Behavior Dog Training is Vero's first Certified Professional Dog Trainer-Knowledge Assessed and Certified Behavior Counselor Canine-Knowledge Assessed. Cissy is a Consulting Dog Trainer & Behavior Counselor for the Humane Society of Vero Beach and Indian River County. If you have a training or behavior question, email Cissy at bbdogtraining@bellsouth.net or visit www.bestbehaviordogtraining.org for additional information.

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