



**APBC**

ASSOCIATION OF PET  
BEHAVIOUR COUNSELLORS

Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors  
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# Raising Puppies to Prevent Behaviour Problems

## Introduction

Bringing a new puppy home is an exciting time for the family but can be an overwhelming experience for the pup – it is usually the first time the puppy has been separated from its mum, littermates, familiar people and surroundings. The first few days and weeks in a puppy's new home are significant in terms of emotional development – a puppy's perception of the world can be permanently influenced by new experiences at this stage in its life. Setting up puppies for success will help reduce stress and the potential for behaviour problems later in life.



## The First Few Days

Dogs have a period of development between approximately 3 and 14 weeks of age where they are particularly sensitive to learning – this is known as the socialisation period (learning to interact appropriately with other dogs, humans and other animals), but also involves 'habituation' (becoming accustomed to non-threatening



things in the environment and learning to ignore them). Puppies typically move into their new home during this sensitive period, so new owners are responsible for continuing controlled exposure to experiences that a good breeder would already have commenced.

Carefully plan introductions to any existing pets. Inappropriate introductions to cats and small furies can lead to frightened small animals and a chase instinct in the puppy – both of which are difficult to alter once an association has been formed. Where possible, place the existing small pets into an area of the house where the puppy is not going to have access initially and consider introductions once the puppy has had an opportunity to settle into its new home. Scent transfers can be conducted before the puppy has been brought home during a visit to the litter, with cloths that have been used to stroke existing pets taken for the puppy to gain olfactory information. Introductions to existing dogs should also be thought through carefully to ensure

a smooth relationship from the start. As well as a two-way scent transfer in advance, visual introductions in the garden allow for extra space and reduced number of resources for guarding potential. Depending on the temperament of existing dogs, they may need to be on a lead and the puppy carried to prevent potential for hostile reactions.

Settled behaviour at night-time is the next thing to aim for from the first night. Leaving your puppy to cry-it-out can be a pre-cursor for separation related behaviours, so ensure you provide your new puppy with company until they have fully settled into their new surroundings. This will help prevent night-time distress. Remember that your pup has spent its nights with its mum and/or littermates and in the only environment it has ever known, so it is bound to find its first few nights in its new home difficult.

## Best Start in Life

Teaching your puppy to remain relaxed when left at home alone is far more preferable than attempts to

resolve separation distress. Young puppies typically sleep soundly and for long periods and these are ideal times to build up separation. Create a safe area where your puppy will be left alone which includes a comfortable bed area as well as space for your puppy to play or rest elsewhere. In addition, enrichment in the form of novel items to explore and self-reinforcing activity feeders can be used to build independence and to create a positive association with this area, initially when you are home.

Socialisation with other dogs should commence before the puppy is fully vaccinated in a safe manner. Interaction with fully vaccinated, even-tempered adult dogs in private gardens is more beneficial to your pup than uncontrolled play with a group of puppies. Appropriately run puppy classes can be hugely beneficial, but it is vital that steps are taken to ensure the puppies find the experience positive. The Animal Behaviour and Training Council is a good online resource to locate the right professional for you.

Carrying your puppy out-and-about allows them to view the world safely – if they are struggling or trying to hide under your arm, they are likely to be finding the experience negative. A puppy that is overwhelmed during their sensitive period of development has the potential to display fear related behaviours, in the same way as a puppy who has not been socialised. Ensure that your puppy's early experiences are positive and they are not forced into any situation they are uncomfortable with.

## Top Tips: Prevention is Better Than Cure

- Provide your puppy with plenty of appropriate items to chew on - variety is key!
- Stuffed Kongs filled with moist food and lickymats provide great opportunities for licking.
- Novel items to play with can include cardboard tubes and boxes, empty plastic bottles, Tetrapack cartons and toys.
- Adaptil (the synthetic version of the pheromone a bitch produces when she is lactating) helps puppies feel safe, secure and calm and is highly recommended during the socialisation period. It has been clinically proven to help puppies adjust to new surroundings and reduce stress when left alone, and has significant beneficial effects on behaviour as it appears to increase capacity to learn by reducing anxiety.
- Remember that behaviour that is rehearsed has the potential to get stronger, so always set the puppy up for success in the first place!