

Advice sheets for puppy owners

If you do not have a puppy at the moment but are thinking about getting one, we suggest you not to do so at this present time. There are significant restrictions on the ability to follow best practice regarding rearing of young kittens at the present time and it would be better to wait until the current COVID-19 situation is resolved and social distancing measures are no longer necessary.

If you have recently welcomed a puppy into your household, then you may be worried about the impact of the restrictions related to the COVID-19 outbreak on your puppy's development and well-being. These guidelines are intended to help you and offer advice at this challenging time.

Physical health considerations

There are necessary alterations in availability of routine veterinary services, including vaccination, at this time and it is very important that you contact your GP veterinary practice to discuss what is available in terms of caring for your puppy's physical health. Please **do not go to the practice premises** without speaking to the practice first as they must operate within the government guidance on social distancing and non-essential contact.

Physical needs of your puppy

If your puppy has not been vaccinated, or you are self-isolating, you may find that you are not able to take your new puppy outside in the same way due to the current government restrictions. It is important to remember that physical exercise can still be provided for your puppy at home and you can continue to make preparations for when the time comes that going for a walk becomes possible. You can start the introduction of a collar and lead and ensure that this is a positive experience for your puppy. Take short walks around your property and in your garden, provided that you have a private outdoor space which is not shared with other dogs from neighbouring properties.

Emotional needs of your puppy

The first few months of your puppy's life set the tone in terms of their behavioural and emotional development. Socialisation and habituation are important learning processes at this time. They enable your puppy to accept the people, animals, objects and experiences in their environment as normal and above all to be happy and relaxed around them.

Learning about the environment

There are a number of ways in which appropriate exposure to the physical domestic environment can be provided within the household. For example, your puppy can see and hear the vacuum cleaner, lawnmower, hairdryer and other household appliances and can be given a range of different toys to introduce unfamiliar movement, textures and sounds in a non-threatening way. The most important thing is that your puppy is always happy and relaxed when these things are introduced, and is not overwhelmed by them. So work at your puppy's pace.

If you are self-isolating or your puppy has not been vaccinated during the COVID-19 situation you will not have the opportunity to take your puppy to locations outside the home. Nonetheless there are still ways in which the external physical environment can be brought to your puppy. For example, sound files of a large number of different sounds in the outside world can be freely downloaded and used (e.g. Sounds Sociable from the Dogs Trust Website (<https://www.dogstrust.org.uk/help-advice/dog-behaviour-health/sound-therapy-for-pets>)).

There is an accompanying booklet for Sounds Sociable that you can also download and this gives additional advice. If you live in a household with babies and small children it is very important for your puppy to learn that the noises that they make are also normal. Sounds files called Sounds Soothing are also available from the Dogs Trust website link above and can be

used to introduce child related noises in a way that encourages your puppy to be happy and relaxed in their presence.

Even if you are self-isolating, a limited degree of exposure to the outside world can be achieved, while maintaining safeguards for your puppy's physical health, by taking your puppy to the door of your property. It is very important to make sure that they are suitably and adequately controlled to ensure that they cannot get out before you open the door. The puppy can sit at the door threshold and be exposed to sounds and sights outside, but obviously these will vary considerably depending on where you live and are likely to be somewhat limited at the moment given government restrictions on outside activity.

If you are not self-isolating and you have a small puppy whom you can easily and comfortably carry (from their perspective as well as yours), it is possible to take the puppy out when you go for your one daily session of outside exercise, even if they are not yet fully vaccinated. It is important to follow government advice and stay close to home but you can try to vary your route so that your puppy gets a variety of experiences. Allow them to watch people and dogs (from a safe distance of a minimum of 2 metres) and get used to traffic and different sounds. It is important to be careful not to overwhelm your puppy and remember that if they are not happy and relaxed they are not benefiting from the experience. If your puppy is showing any sign of struggling, you should go home immediately. Make sure that you continue to observe the social distancing guidance and you stay at least 2 metres away from any other people. If you find that the sight of your puppy is encouraging other people to come too close to you, you need to step back, and return home. Vaccinated puppies (and older dogs) can be walked on a lead close to your home provided that the social distancing guidance is followed.

Under current restrictions it is not possible to take your puppy out for trips in the car for the purposes of habituation but you can still get your puppy used to the car while it remains stationary on the driveway or outside your home. Put your puppy in the car regularly and practise turning on the engine. As always it is important that your puppy is happy and relaxed during this experience and you can help to achieve this by giving them a tasty chew or food dispenser, such as a Kong®, while they are in the car.

Providing appropriate experiences while staying at home

The most significant restriction for puppies during this COVID-19 situation is in terms of the limited variety of people that they can encounter. It is very important to follow government advice and therefore your puppy will only be able to directly interact with yourself and members of your immediate household. This is not ideal but there are a couple of ways in which you can provide a wider experience for your puppy, while observing social distancing rules at all times.

1. If you have a garden and neighbours who are dog friendly you can speak to them over the fence (provided that you are 2 metres apart) and your puppy can see and hear them, but not physically interact with them. You can play with your puppy or give them something tasty to chew on while you chat with your neighbours. This will help your puppy to be relaxed and also decrease the potential for them to get frustrated because they cannot physically interact with the people.
2. You can alter your physical appearance and that of your household members by using glasses, hats, different clothes, walking sticks etc. You will still smell and sound the same so this is only a limited exposure to human variation but it is a start. Remember the most important thing is that your puppy is happy and relaxed when encountering you in these different disguises. If your puppy is overwhelmed or appears worried at any stage you should remove the disguise immediately, and allow the puppy to calm down in its own time. Do not make a big fuss at this time as this may make matters

worse. You can however drop some treats onto the floor or a favourite toy and wait for the puppy to access these in their own time.

Other ways in which you can help to ensure appropriate emotional development for your puppy during the COVID-19 situation include:

1. Ensure your puppy gets used to being left alone. This is more difficult while people are restricted within their homes but you can create some time alone for your puppy by them being in a different room if that is possible. If you do not have another room you can have short periods of time when you do not interact with your puppy and you can consider a playpen or indoor pen for your puppy to make this easier to achieve. When your puppy is alone remember to take steps to make sure that this is a positive experience for them, for example by providing them with a toy to play with or a tasty chew or Kong. Introduce periods of separation gradually and keep them short but frequent initially.
2. Get your puppy used to novelty – you can get your puppy used to different items and surfaces at home. Initially put out some different surfaces on the floor in your home and place some of your puppy's daily food ration on the floor around them. Various items can be used, such as car mats, bathroom mats, carpet tiles etc. but make sure they are safe for your puppy before using them. Leave your puppy to investigate the different items of their own accord. Once they are used to the items being present you can place some of the food on the item to encourage your puppy to walk across the different textures.
3. Get your puppy used to handling – you can still create a positive association with handling whilst you are at home, in fact you may have even more time for this than before! Start off with really gentle stroking, and build up to brushing etc. followed by a treat. You can also introduce health handling and procedures in the same way, such as tooth brushing, looking at eyes and ears, opening the mouth and examining feet. Even though you are at home and may have more time please remember that handling should be done in short frequent sessions and not for long durations. It is also important not to be too intense and to stop if your puppy shows any signs of being overwhelmed or worried. The most important thing is that your puppy is always happy and relaxed.
4. Use your time together to teach your puppy the things you want it to do when it is an adult. You can train them to verbal cues using food rewards and there are many good examples of this on social media. In the interests of helping your puppy's healthy development, do not use training that involves physical correction (such as pushing your puppy into a sit) or any form of aversive training aids, such as rattle cans, water pistols etc, or loud verbal correction, even if it also uses rewards. At the present time, face to face training classes are not available but some reputable and suitably qualified dog trainers are providing remote advice using suitable technology. Ask your veterinary practice to advise you where you can access this information from reliable and trustworthy sources in your local area. Finally, remember, it is not just about obedience training, it's about getting a well-behaved and sociable puppy, i.e. one who does more of what you want when you want it, without being asked. So look out for behaviours you like, and remember to reward them. There are some videos about training and problem prevention available at <https://www.dogstrust.org.uk/help-advice/training>

Establishing a good relationship with your puppy

In addition to the need for appropriate socialisation and habituation, the early months of life are also crucial for establishing a good relationship between you and your puppy. Being

consistent and interacting with your puppy in ways that enable them to learn to predict what you are going to do and what you want are key to this. Avoiding any interactions which your puppy finds unpleasant, such as shouting or using things like water pistols or rattle cans, and using things that your puppy finds rewarding, such as food treats or play, is also really important to developing a healthy relationship. If your puppy does show signs of being scared, however unjustified that may seem, you should not ignore your puppy. Quietly acknowledge them but then show, through your own behaviour (a happy voice and playful action), that this is really nothing to be scared about. Do not however force your puppy to engage in the activity or interaction; instead let it do things at its own pace.

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