

The first puppy consult: advice for the new owner...

A YEAR ago a good friend of mine took on a puppy as a family pet and I provided her with some basic behavioural advice, including the importance of socialisation and training.

Despite my friend starting with good intentions, her enthusiasm in following this advice

waned over time and her now adult dog has recently started to demonstrate possessive tendencies culminating in growling at family members.

I went on to consider how many of the puppies I see in the first puppy consult go on to display behavioural problems later on in life which, if dealt with at a younger age, would never have happened.

This is exactly the point made by the recent webinar, organised by The Webinar Vet, led by Dr Valerie Jonckheer-Sheehy who believes that, with a 500% increase in dog bite injuries since 1989 in England, we should be offering substantial behavioural advice right from the start of a puppy's life.

Unfortunately, a standard 30-minute consult is unlikely to be long enough to provide all the necessary advice

and Valerie believes a 60-minute first puppy consult would be a worthwhile investment not just for the puppy and owner but also for the practice. It is up to the discretion of the practice

whether to charge for this.

Within this webinar Valerie discusses the types of behavioural advice we should be offering owners of new puppies, including socialisation, crate training, toilet training and, first and foremost, child safety. This applies to everyone who owns a dog, whether or not the puppy is entering a family environment, as the dog will likely encounter children as visitors to the house or children wanting to pet the dog whilst out for a walk.

Child safety

Valerie advises that the safety of a child has to be a priority, especially with data demonstrating the majority of young children, if bitten, will be bitten in the face.

Advice should be given to owners on how to minimise any risk of a child being injured by a dog and Valerie suggests a list of seven rules which can be discussed with owners and perhaps given as a hand-out at the time of a consult to aid in the safety of both dog and child:

1. Children should not be allowed to grab a dog for a cuddle or a kiss. Obviously every child wants to kiss and cuddle their dog but imagine how intimidating it must be for a dog to have a face lunging at them. An alternative would be to allow the child to kiss their hand and then stroke their hand down the back of the dog.
2. No dog should be unnecessarily disturbed if at rest, i.e. "let sleeping dogs lie".
3. Young babies or children should never be left alone with a dog. Valerie explained that it is a sad fact that many of the babies mauled and even killed by dogs are those which have been left alone, sometimes on the floor in a low-slung baby chair or car seat. A barrier such as a play pen or stair gate, although not infallible, should always be used to separate the dog and child for both their safety.

In spite of this, a lot of child dog bites do occur in the presence of

adults. This may be because the adult isn't monitoring the child's or the dog's behaviour.

It may also be due to misinterpretation of the behaviours and/or failure to take adequate steps when necessary, e.g. when the child is climbing on the dog and the dog is showing subtle signs of anxiety such as lip licking or turning his head away.

4. Never let children grab a dog's food or water bowl.

5. Never allow anyone to "pull" something from a dog's mouth. The dog needs to be taught the "drop it" command by exchanging the object in the mouth for a more valuable item such as a titbit.

6. Children should never be allowed to pull or poke at dogs.

7. Adults and children should not be allowed to play roughly with their dog as this will encourage the dog to jump up at people or become over-aroused which can lead to (play-) biting.

This can be especially scary for children and Valerie suggested a great tip, which has worked really well on my four-year-old daughter who is ironically terrified of dogs.

She advises children adopt the "princess" pose in the presence of an over-zealous dog (I'm sure this could be creatively renamed to the "Egyptian mummy" pose for boys) which consists of the child turning his or her back on the dog, putting his or her head in the air to avoid

eye contact and crossing arms over the chest so there are no encouraging "dangly" bits for dogs to leap at.

The dog can then be rewarded as soon as it's sitting calmly again. This should help calm the boisterous dog down and has certainly helped my daughter cope in the company of our canine friends where hysterics are no longer the norm.

Socialisation

Socialisation of a puppy younger than three months old is crucial in allowing dogs to deal positively with a variety of situations later on in life. This involves providing as many positive experiences as possible with different and unfamiliar people using treats as a reward.

Positive experiences with well-behaved dogs are also essential as well as training a dog to enjoy being handled in a number of different ways including having their paws and ears examined.

Valerie recommended Dr Sophia Yin's website for further advice on this subject which also provides a puppy socialisation check-list.

Crate training

Using a crate can be a really useful tool in providing a safe and familiar haven for a puppy.

When discussing crate training with a client, Valerie suggests always ensuring the size of the crate will be an adequate size for the puppy and that the crate is placed in the right location. For example, placing it in full sunlight would not be appropriate.

When initiating crate training, Valerie suggests just placing food and toys into the crate and letting the puppy come and go as it pleases.

The door can then be shut for a few seconds by giving the puppy a filled Kong toy that it has previously played with – build it up slowly and only shut in the dog when it is completely comfortable with the crate.

It is, however, really important to remember if a puppy starts crying in the crate that it should only be let out when the crying stops or this behaviour will only be reinforced. However, if a puppy is extremely distraught and is harming itself as a result of its behaviour it should be released. Then you need to go back a step or two in the training.

House training

Valerie explained there are several ways to house-train a puppy but she suggests using "The Magic Number 6 Method" as she likes to call it. She advises feeding six small meals a day and taking the puppy out after each meal as well as after sleeping and after playing.

Only some of the advice delivered by Valerie has been provided within this article. There are a number of other really useful tips available within this webinar as well as explanations and suggestions around the use of positive and negative reinforcement.

Some excellent references were also provided for further information useful to both vets and owners.

This was a really thought-provoking veterinary webinar which gave a very convincing account as to why we should be offering substantial behavioural advice within the first puppy consult and, as for my friend, it may have also been really useful for this behavioural advice to be reinforced at repeat visits.

JAYNE LAYCOCK

reports on her 'pick of the month' CPD webinar, *The Importance of Behavioural Advice in the First Puppy Consult*, with veterinary behaviour specialist Valerie Jonckheer-Sheehy



Valerie Jonckheer-Sheehy, MVB, MSc, LAS, CertWEL, DipECAWBM (BM), graduated from Dublin in 2003. Her first job was in a mixed practice in Wales and she then worked for several NGOs in Brussels including the FVE and Eurogroup for animals. In 2006 she completed a Masters in Laboratory Animal Science (awarded by Gent University in Belgium) and then spent several years in India where she worked at a horse racing track, polo club, small animal clinic and did voluntary work for several different animal shelters. Valerie has worked as a veterinarian at the Animal Behaviour Clinic at the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, Utrecht University, and recently became the first European Specialist in Veterinary Behavioural Medicine in the Netherlands. She founded Animalytics Veterinary Behavioural Medicine and Animal Welfare Consultancy in the Netherlands in 2013.



Valerie Jonckheer-Sheehy.