

## Puppies Need Classes Before Vaccinations are Complete



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Here's a fact that few dog owners know. By the time a puppy is 16 weeks old, the development of their temperament is nearly complete. This means most owners have only about 8 weeks to make or break their puppy's chances of growing up to be emotionally and socially stable dogs. The critical imprint period for exposing puppies to a variety of people, places and things begins at 2 weeks of age and ends around the 16th week. After 16 weeks, the dog has very poor abilities to develop or change its social skills.

Does all this mean we should flood our puppies with as many dogs and people as possible? Not at all. In fact, socialization will backfire miserably if it isn't done with attention to keeping all interactions short, safe and positive.

### Which dogs are more likely to be at risk?

The thought of a bunch of puppies rolling around with each other in blissful play is a dog lover's dream. But, not all breeds or individuals were meant to be the "life of the party."

Selective breeding creates dogs who are more easily trained to specific jobs. Between breeding and individual genetic information, it is easy to end up with a dog who is more prone to timid, cautious, fearful or predatory behavior. Among these are herding breeds, guarding breeds, toy breeds and terriers. An experienced trainer or behavior specialist teaching your puppy class can help identify and supply counseling for puppies at risk.

### Starting off on the right paw

The American Veterinary Association of Animal Behavior has issued a position statement on early puppy socialization hoping

to educate both owners and veterinarians regarding this simple premise:

"The primary and most important time for puppy socialization is the first three months of life. During this time puppies should be exposed to as many new people, animals, stimuli and environments as can be achieved safely and without causing over-stimulation manifested as excessive fear, withdrawal or avoidance behavior.

For this reason, the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior believes that it should be the standard of care for puppies to receive such socialization before they are fully vaccinated." *The full position statement is available on line at [www.avsonline.org](http://www.avsonline.org).*

### Protecting puppies

There is no question that puppies need to be protected from infectious diseases like Parvo Virus and Distemper, but according to Dr. R. K. Anderson, DVM and the Director of the Center to Study Human/Animal Relationships, College of Veterinary Medicine, University of Minnesota, the risk of dying from euthanasia due to behavior problems is 1,000 times more than the risk of dying from Distemper or Parvo when the recommended vaccination schedules are followed and puppies attend classes given in a safe, positive, clean and monitored environment.

How does a puppy owner find classes that fit this description? Do your homework and use common sense.

1. Choose a class that is offered in a private business that monitors every dog that enters the premises. Typically, big box stores have no idea what the health status is of the dogs who accompany their owners for shopping. The average big box store is a dangerously unmonitored environment for young puppies.

2. Drop by and take a look for yourself. After you find a class in a private facility, go by and ask for a tour. Ask what the vaccination policy is for dogs attending activities in the facility.

3. Ask about the puppy program:
- What is the focus of the class?
  - What are the qualifications of the trainer?
  - How are the puppies managed in the class?
  - Are toy breed puppies protected from injury by large breed puppies?
  - Is there an effort to require that all social play is consensual or are timid puppies coaxed to cope with threatening behavior?
  - Is there a policy about bringing a sick puppy to class?
  - Is all socialization done with positive methods that allow a dog to progress at its own pace even if that means that a shy



puppy spends the entire class sitting with its owner and not participating?

No matter what a puppy's social skills are, we are responsible for strengthening and maintaining our dog's confidence and response to the world they live in.

*Laura Brody is a certified dog trainer and specializes in behavior problem solving and prevention. She lives in Douglas County with her four dogs and husband. She is the owner of Good Family Dog Behavior and Training. She is also an associate member of Victoria Stilwell's Positively Dog Training team. For more information about her puppy and adult classes, visit her at [www.goodfamilydog.com](http://www.goodfamilydog.com) or email her at [laura@goodfamilydog.com](mailto:laura@goodfamilydog.com).*

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