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Puppy Vaccination and Socialization Should Go Together

TO: My Colleagues in Veterinary Medicine:

Common questions I receive from puppy owners, dog trainers and veterinarians concern: 1) what is the most favorable age or period of time when puppies learn best? 2) what are the health implications of my advice that veterinarians and trainers should offer socialization programs for puppies starting at 8 to 9 weeks of age.

Puppies begin learning at birth and their brains appear to be particularly responsive to learning and retaining experiences that are encountered during the first 13 to 16 weeks after birth. This means that breeders, new puppy owners, veterinarians, trainers and behaviorists have a responsibility to assist in providing these learning/socialization experiences with other puppies/dogs, with children/adults and with various environmental situations during this optimal period from birth to 16 weeks.

Many veterinarians are making this early socialization and learning program part of a total wellness plan for breeders and new owners of puppies during the first 16 weeks of a puppy's life -- the first 7-8 weeks with the breeder and the next 8 weeks with the new owners. This socialization program should enroll puppies from 8 to 12 weeks of age as a key part of any preventive medicine program to improve the bond between pets and their people and keep dogs as valued members of the family for 12 to 18 years.

To take full advantage of this early special learning period, many veterinarians recommend that new owners take their puppies to puppy socialization classes, beginning at 8 to 9 weeks of age. At this age they should have (and can be required to have) received a minimum of their first series of vaccines for protection against infectious diseases. This provides the basis for increasing immunity by further repeated exposure to these antigens either through natural exposure in small doses or artificial exposure with vaccines during the next 8 to 12 weeks. In addition the owner and people offering puppy socialization should take precautions to have the environment and the participating puppies as free of natural exposure as possible by good hygiene and caring by careful instructors and owners.

Experience and epidemiologic data support the relative safety and lack of transmission of disease in these puppy socialization classes over the past 10 years in many parts of the United States. In fact, the risk of a dog dying because of infection with distemper or parvo disease is far less than the much higher risk of a dog dying (euthanasia) because of a behavior problem. Many veterinarians are now offering new puppy owners puppy socialization classes in their hospitals or nearby training facilities in conjunction with trainers and behaviorists because they want socialization and training to be very important parts of a wellness plan for every puppy. We need to recognize that this special sensitive period for learning is the best opportunity we have to influence behavior for dogs and the most important and longest lasting part of a total wellness plan.

Are there risks? Yes. But 10 years of good experience and data, with few exceptions, offers veterinarians the opportunity to generally recommend early socialization and training classes, beginning when puppies are 8 to 9 weeks of age. However, we always follow a veterinarian's professional judgment, in individual cases or situations, where special circumstances warrant further immunization for a special puppy before starting such classes. During any period of delay for puppy classes, owners should begin a program of socialization with children and adults, outside their family, to take advantage of this special period in a puppy's life.

If there are further questions, veterinarians may call me at 651-644-7400 for discussion and clarification.

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