Socialization Classes for Puppies and Kittens

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The early weeks of life are an important time for dogs and cats to learn about the world around them, become socialized to humans, and learn species-specific social “etiquette.” While isolating a puppy or kitten until it is several months old and has received all of its vaccinations prevents exposure to infectious disease, it also prevents social learning during the time in the animal’s life when it is most receptive to learning social skills. Therefore, it is desirable to find an appropriate balance between concerns about infectious disease and concerns about developing normal social behavior (see the box on page 675). Socialization classes are not obedience training classes, although it may be beneficial to include a small amount of education in simple positive reinforcement techniques. (For Simple Obedience Lessons for Puppies, see the Compendium Web extras at vetlearn.com.)

A benefit of offering socialization classes in veterinary hospitals is that some of the lessons can include habituating puppies and kittens to unfamiliar stimuli present in the hospital, thereby helping to prevent the development of classically conditioned fear responses to the veterinary hospital. Another benefit is the ability to educate groups of owners about appropriate pet care. The group size will depend on the size of the room in which classes are held (e.g., waiting room, conference room) and the number of personnel available to teach and supervise. The space must be sufficient for people and animals to move around freely without frequently getting in each other’s way. As a rule of thumb, one teacher for every four owner–animal pairs is a good ratio.

WHEN TO START

There is some debate about the best age for socializing puppies and kittens, and, to some degree, practical issues affect the acceptable age range in classes. For kittens, 7 to 14 weeks is generally a good age range, while puppies may benefit from participation at ages up to 16 weeks. While these are considered ideal ages, socialization is a process that continues after the primary socialization periods, and holding classes for juveniles may be beneficial as well.

SCHEDULING CLASSES

There are two main ways to organize a complete series of classes. One is to have a group of puppies or kittens start at the same time and continue through a set sequence of classes together. Another is to have a fixed rotation of classes (Table 1) and allow individual animals to begin at any time. In this schedule, different animals will be starting and completing the class series at different times. The size of your practice—particularly the number of puppies and kittens coming to the practice at one time—and the personnel available will determine which is the best arrangement for your practice.

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CLASS GOALS
Socialization classes should be organized with specific goals in mind. One goal is to expose kittens and puppies to humans other than their family members in a friendly, nonthreatening environment. Exposure to many different people—for example, people of both sexes, different ages, and different races, or people dressed in various ways—is ideal. In this way, puppies and kittens will better accept a diverse range of humans to be a normal part of their environment. Encourage participation by all family members, including children, unless they are too young to follow simple instructions regarding the gentle handling of young animals. If there is sufficient space, volunteers from youth organizations can provide additional diversity.

Another goal is to expose kittens and puppies to other members of their own species and to members of other species in a supervised, safe context. It is through exploration, greeting, play, and other forms of social interaction that kittens and puppies become comfortable with other animals. Kittens and puppies not exposed to members of their own species during the socialization period are likely to have abnormal responses, such as excessive timidity or excessive aggression, when meeting other members of their own species at a later age. A critical skill learned by cats and dogs during this time is the inhibited bite. When a puppy or kitten bites a playmate too hard, the playmate will generally cry out and stop playing with the offender. This serves as negative punishment for biting too hard. However, it may be beneficial to initially separate animals with very different temperaments (see the box on top left of page 676).

Table 1. Sample 4-Week Set of Classes for Kittens

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Kitten Activity</th>
<th>Owner Education</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Kitten is gently handled by multiple people and practices coming when called.</td>
<td>Discuss litterbox management, basics of animal learning, and how to train with positive reinforcement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Digits are handled, kittens are groomed, and owners administer tasty juice with a syringe.</td>
<td>Demonstrate how to trim nails, give pills or liquid solutions with a syringe, and groom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Kittens play with a variety of toys.</td>
<td>Review normal cat play and scratching behavior and, discuss provision of toys and scratching posts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Kittens are placed on an examination table, given treats, and played with while a pretend examination is conducted.</td>
<td>Discuss age-appropriate diet and basic first aid.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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*Medical Requirements for Puppies and Kittens Participating in Socialization Classes*

- Animals must be free of any signs of clinical disease (e.g., diarrhea, nasal discharge, skin lesions).
- Animals must have had a comprehensive physical examination and deworming before participation in the first class.
- Animals must not have been exposed to other animals with infectious diseases, even if they are not currently showing signs of illness.
- Puppies should have their first vaccination against distemper, parvovirus, and hepatitis at least 10 days before the first class.
- Kittens should have their first vaccination against calicivirus, panleukopenia virus, and feline viral rhinotracheitis virus at least 10 days before the first class as well as negative results from recent FeLV/FIV tests.

While most socialization classes tend to focus on socialization to humans and members of the animal’s own species, socialization to other species can be very beneficial. For puppies, the presence of a friendly, adult cat that is calm around dogs can assist in this process, while for kittens, exposure to a friendly, calm dog can do the same. Early exposure to species other than dogs and cats (e.g., a large rabbit that is comfortable around dogs...
or cats) can also be considered. All such interactions must, of course, be carefully supervised, and all safety considerations must be addressed.

A third goal is to expose kittens and puppies to a variety of objects, such as metal tables, stethoscopes, tricycles, bicycles, books, and buckets. With the exception of objects common to the hospital, the exact items are not very important. Exposure to a variety of novel stimuli without experiencing pain or other unpleasant consequences can decrease the intensity of the response to novel stimuli in the future. A puppy or kitten that grows up in a barren environment with little exposure to novel stimuli is likely to overreact to novel stimuli when it is an adult. The response may be so severe that the animal has neophobia (fear of anything new). It is extremely difficult and stressful for these animals and their human caregivers to travel, move to a new home, or even adapt to new objects, such as furniture, in the home. In contrast, puppies or kittens that experience a wide variety of novel objects in a fun or at least neutral context will readily accept novel stimuli. It can be useful to give families homework assignments, such as a list of objects to expose their pets to during the week, and review their progress at the next class.

### Keeping Order in the Classroom

Particularly with puppies, it may be necessary to separate the larger or more energetic animals from the smaller or more timid ones, at least initially. However, having a range of puppy sizes and temperaments in the class can also be used as a learning opportunity. With careful supervision, timid puppies will become more accepting of their own species, although they should never be forced to interact, while energetic puppies will have an opportunity to learn to inhibit their behavior. Shy puppies should be allowed to watch from the sidelines. Arranging for a shy puppy to initially interact with just one or two other puppies of similar temperament can provide a good beginning. It may be beneficial for shy puppies to repeat some or all of the classes so that they can steadily progress in their social interaction with other puppies as they mature. Overly energetic puppies may need to be gently restrained from jumping on or otherwise harassing other puppies. Brief “time-outs” for inappropriate behavior can also serve as a form of negative punishment (removal of a pleasant experience) for overly energetic puppies.

### Puppy and Kitten Owner “Don’ts”

- Do not roll the puppy or kitten on its back and pin it down in an attempt to teach it that you are dominant. This can be very frightening and classically condition the animal to be afraid of humans, leading to fear-induced behavior problems later in life.
- Do not punish the animal after it has urinated or defecated in an undesired location; however, mild punishment (e.g., a mild verbal reprimand) as the animal eliminates at an undesired location is generally acceptable. Do not ever rub its nose in its excrement. Delayed punishment will not help the young animal learn where not to eliminate and will only frighten it.
- Do not play with the puppy or kitten using your hands or feet as toys or allow it to “cut its teeth” on your hands or feet. This teaches the young animal that it is acceptable to bite, scratch, and chew on human appendages.

In addition to specific goals for the puppy or kitten, educational goals for the pet owners should be identified. These can include appropriate ways to pick up and carry the pet, housetraining or litterbox management, basic first aid, appropriate ways to medicate and groom the pet, suitable toys and games, crate training, and simple training techniques using positive reinforcement. In addition to discussing what is best to do when raising a puppy or kitten, it is beneficial to discuss what not to do. There are many harmful myths in the public sphere regarding how to raise puppies and kittens (see the box above). Educational handouts can be provided on topics that you find are common sources of client confusion.

### CONCLUSION

Socialization is optimally learned when kittens and puppies are young and should ideally be instituted as soon as they are old enough to begin developing an immune response to diseases that are preventable through routine vaccination. Socialization classes can be considered a form of vaccination against future behavior problems.
Socialization of puppies and kittens. STUDY. Flashcards. Socialization. The process of preparing a cat or dog to enjoy interactions and be comfortable with other animals, people, places and activities. Goal of socialization. Positive emotional outcomes, avoid stress and fear and behavioural issues, adapt to change. not react with fear or aggression to every day events.

Important socialization periods dogs. 4-12 weeks. Important socialization periods Kittens. 3-7 weeks. Under socialized cat- fearful. Hide when visitors come, fear and unfamiliar environments, do not enjoy human handling. Under socialized puppy. Fear Dash biters. Shy/timid. Puppies can begin socialization classes as early as 7 to 8 weeks. Veterinarians recommend at least one round of vaccines 7 days before socialization and the first round of deworming. After the first 12 to 14 weeks of your puppy's life, continued socialization and introduction to new environments is important. This reinforces good behavior. Keeping a positive environment is important for puppies to feel safe and secure while learning new things.

Why Is Puppy Socialization Important? A well-socialized puppy creates a behaved, relaxed, safer dog. If your puppy is comfortable in a wider variety of Semantic Scholar extracted view of "Socialization classes for puppies and kittens." by S. Crowell-Davis. Veterinary owners socialize their pet. Learn how to educate pet owners on the importance of socialization in young animals and the effects it can have on their safety and welfare. Puppies that go through socialization classes are more likely to be kept in the home as adult dogs. Well-designed classes provide positive exposure to new sights, sounds, and humans; a variety of surfaces; and social play. Classes can also provide pet owners with basic information on puppy or kitten ownership and address common behavior problems (eg, chewing, scratching, house training). The curriculum should include introductions to pet carriers and/or crates and information on how to safely transport pets in a vehicle. Classes should include socialization opportunities with people and play with the other puppies, not just basic obedience (see: why do dogs play?). Puppy class usually lasts 6 weeks, and one study suggests that a one-off puppy party does not have as many benefits. Remember it’s your job to take care of your puppy and ensure those experiences are positive. Just as for puppies, it’s important the handling is a positive experience for kittens. Again, you can give them a choice (let them approach you). Speaking nicely to them while handling is also a good idea. Even though the sensitive period for socialization will have passed when you bring your kitten home, it’s important to continue to give the kitten positive experiences.