

Play Sessions – Intervention

Most groups of puppies can safely play together with little to no intervention. However, there are some dynamics that require intervention. Good judgment regarding when intervention is needed comes with experience. Here are some general guidelines:

Managing Scared Pups

Never force scared puppies to interact with either people or dogs. If you ask a scared pup to come out from hiding into a play session, he must choose between disobeying and being frightened. If he obeys, he may lose trust in you by getting pounced on after coming as asked. Putting a terrified puppy in the middle of a play session is called “flooding”, and it is a very risky strategy. The pup may overcome his fear, but there is a high risk of him becoming *more* fearful instead. The goal in socializing terrified puppies is to gradually desensitize and condition them, using safe, low-key, orchestrated interactions.

There are a few options for managing scared puppies during play sessions:

- If the dog is terrified, let him stay on his owner’s lap, being offered treats if he will eat them. This gives him some time to acclimatize, and the treats create a positive association with the environment.
- If the dog is only a bit frightened, allow him to sniff each of the other dogs’ bums, while the other dog's face is kept busy with a treat. This can be done on laps if the dogs are small, or on the floor. Owners find this exercise quite entertaining. Explain that this is how dogs get information from each other, and the more information a scared dog has, the less scary the situation is for him.
- The owner or an assistant can sit on the floor with the scared pup on her lap, creating a bit of a fortress by making a barricade with her arms. This stops rambunctious dogs from bowling the scared one over, yet allows for some sniffing and investigating.
- An ex-pen (six-paneled pen) or crate can be used to allow the scared puppy to be on the floor in the room, sniffing the other dogs but not fully interacting with them. The crate or pen can be placed in a corner so that only some of the panels are accessible to other dogs, or in the middle of the room so that dogs can approach from all sides. The owner can sit with the pup in the ex-pen to provide reassurance and treats.
- An x-pen can also be used to place one or two mild-mannered pups in with the scared pup for some confidence-building interactions.

Any of these techniques are fine, so long as the puppy is not becoming more frightened over time. If he is, then this is an emergency, and if you are not confident in your ability to counsel the dog and owner, seek the input of a more experienced colleague or a behaviorist. The beauty of the socialization window is that most scared puppies will warm up quickly to dogs and people provided they get adequate appropriate exposure. It is quite common for scared puppies to become comfortable with other pups and even start playing with them – all within the very first day of puppy class.

Soothing a scared puppy and giving him treats if he will eat them is good training – you do not need to worry about “rewarding” fearful behaviour. Genuine fear is an emotional response, not an intentional behaviour carried out by the dog in order to acquire a reward. A true fear problem requires classical conditioning to fix – you need to create a new association for the dog. The dog needs to learn that other puppies predict fun not danger. Therefore, anything you can do to make the situation less scary is a step in the right direction.

If this concept is confusing to you, please review the difference between operant conditioning (dog does something to get a reward or to avoid a punishment) and classical conditioning (dog learns what predicts what).

Note: if a stressed puppy is not interested in food do not continue to offer food, because it is nauseating for him.

Pushy Pups

A rambunctious puppy with poor radar for social signals can be mistaken for a bully. It really does not matter how you classify the pup – if she is being overbearing and is upsetting the other puppies then some intervention is required regardless of her presumed motivation.

It is very rare to have a real bully in the group. Most of the time the pup that people think is a bully is just boisterous or a bit pushy. If a puppy seems to be constantly seeking non-consensual interactions, the acid test to see if it is normal play fighting or non-consensual bullying is to gently lift the “bully” off the other puppy and see if the other puppy approaches the “bully” for more interaction, or runs away looking quite upset. If she goes back for more, it is just play fighting or rambunctious play, and owners will be relieved to see that no intervention is needed. Boisterous puppies can be distracted and redirected towards other dogs if they bug a certain puppy too much. If, when the possible “bully” is lifted off the “underdog”, the “underdog” runs away looking frightened, then it may in fact be bullying behaviour, and intervention is likely warranted.

A simple and very effective intervention technique for bullying is to shadow the “bully” and as soon as the bullying behaviour starts mark it with “Ah-ah” then carry out an immediate 3-minute time-out. The “bully” puppy is carried out of the play session and either crated or seated upright on the lap of an assistant, with the assistant holding the puppy with interlocking fingers under the puppy’s armpits. The punishing element of this procedure is the loss of playtime, which is a very effective punishment for a puppy that likes bullying during play sessions. In addition to using time-outs for bullying behaviour, the bully pup must be rewarded for non-bullying behaviour. When the “bully” pup ignores her former “victim”, or plays nicely with any of the pups, she should be praised and given a treat. If the “bully” pup causes significant anxiety among owners she can be fitted with a head halter and held on a 6-foot leash by an assistant during play sessions for added control and ease of intervention. Management of bully/pushy pups must be handled *very* delicately so that the owner and the puppy are not stigmatized!

Big Size, Age, and Breed Differentials

It is always a bit of a concern when there are big differences in size, age and breed among puppies in the same class. Sometimes the combination of specific breeds can make size differences less worrisome (i.e., Newfoundland and Jack Russell), but sometimes the combination of breeds can make size differences even more worrisome (i.e., Malamute and Chihuahua). Likewise, age differences can either buffer or exacerbate concerns about inter-pup dynamics.

Big size difference + big age difference + iffy breed combinations *can* be a recipe for disaster. For instance, an 18-week-old large terrier breed could physically and psychologically traumatize a 7-week-old toy breed.

The narrower your school's admission age range the less of a problem these differences pose. Try to compose classes taking age, size and breed into account when possible. If you are accepting puppies that are as young as 7 weeks and as old as 18 weeks it is prudent to either divide classes by age (for example 7-12 week olds are in separate classes from 12-18 week olds) or take age, size and breed all into account when composing each class.

If you have a risky size/age/breed differential in class, there are a few ways to increase safety (and owner comfort) surrounding play sessions:

- Split the play session. Keep dogs who are not in play session in settle position on their owner's lap (see Week 2 class plan for how to teach Settle on lap). Keep play sessions short and give reinforcing attention to the owners who are settling their dogs.
- Split the play session by dividing the classroom with portable fencing. Dogs can be shuffled between groups as dynamics permit.
- Split the play session by using two rooms if you have the facilities to do so. Keep in mind that, unless you have assistance, it can be difficult to monitor both rooms simultaneously. Dogs can be shuffled between groups as dynamics permit.
- If the problem dynamic is just one pair of dogs, owners of the pair can take turns having their dogs play or settle on their lap.
- If the problem is one dog who is perceived as problematic or truly is problematic, give the rest of the group lots of playtime without him involved so that they do not become resentful of him. When not in the play session, the problem dog can be in an open getting treats for sniffing each dog that approaches him, or working on obedience exercises with the owner or your assistant. If appropriate and safe, he can join play sessions for short periods, held by you or your assistant, on a long leash and head halter. These are usually short-term solutions to give the instructor an opportunity to assess, without creating undue anxiety among owners, the actual risk the dog poses and to determine if there is a need for a transfer to another more suitable class.

Prizes

A good rule of thumb for prize giving is that if prizes are to be awarded to half or more of the class, then they should be awarded to the rest of the class as well. In contests where the class is divided into two teams you can give one type of sticker to the team that comes first and another type of sticker to the team that comes second.

If you give a “fastest” prize to someone, you can give a “slowest” prize too, and call it the “turtle prize” – which makes everyone laugh.

At any time, children in the course can be awarded achievement cards when they make a particularly good effort or overcome a hurdle. They are designed for teachers to give to students, and are readily available in stationary supply stores. If you give an achievement card to one child, be sure to observe for and recognize, with cards, the other children’s achievements as well.

Cheap prizes are just as good as costly ones. Some good cheapies are:

- stickers: stars, smiley faces, “Good job” or “Wow” exclamation stickers – you can put them right on the puppy’s forehead or on the back of a child’s hand
- pressed rawhide
- lanyard (a neck strap with a clip meant for keys or ID cards) to hang a clicker on
- bandanas
- dog cookies

Reinforcement Schedules

A continuous reinforcement schedule is used to teach a new behaviour. Once a dog learns to do something reliably, like sit in response to a hand signal, we keep her motivated to continue to perform the behaviour by only rewarding her for the behaviour from time to time. There are many different ways to do this.

One way is to reward a fraction of occurrences of the target behaviour... like one of every 5 Sits. This is one type of partial reinforcement schedule – depending on the specific training goal, other types of partial reinforcement schedules can be used as well.

Another way to reward a dog’s behaviour only sometimes is to reward her only for her best performances – like her quickest or prettiest Sits. This is often called a partial reinforcement schedule, because the dog is only being rewarded for some occurrences of the target behaviour, but, since we are not only rewarding her part of the time, but also only for certain *types* of the target behaviour, the correct term for this schedule is a differential reinforcement schedule.

Once a behaviour is learned, it is best maintained by being rewarded only from time to time, using either a partial reinforcement or differential reinforcement schedule. Doing so provides motivation for compliance many times in a row *between* rewards – because the dog knows that eventually her compliance *will* be rewarded. Depending on the type of schedule used, non-continuous reinforcement can also provide motivation for improved quality of performance.

For more information on animal learning theory refer to *Excel-erated Learning* by Pamela Reid, available @ www.jamesandkenneth.com