

The Veterinarian's Role in Puppy Development

by Lore Haug

Veterinarians play a unique and important role in a puppy's life. Once a puppy leaves the breeder's home, the veterinarian is typically the first, and sometimes the only, professional to have contact with the puppy and its new owner over the next several weeks or months. Veterinarians are in a unique position to assist new puppy owners since they have several contacts with a puppy over the first four to eight months of the puppy's life. Once a puppy owner makes contact with their veterinarian for the puppy's first visit, the veterinarian has several important responsibilities: 1) to establish an appropriate vaccination schedule to maximize protection against communicable disease yet minimize adverse reactions; 2) to ensure the puppy has as positive an experience as possible during each visit; 3) to educate the owner about general health care, disease conditions, and behavioral traits that may be specific to the chosen breed; 4) to educate the owner about the importance of socialization and early training; and 5) to help the owner recognize potential behavior problems early and seek appropriate intervention.

Puppies are typically presented for their first veterinary visit between five and nine weeks of age. The first vaccination is generally given between six and eight weeks of age. A minimum of two vaccinations is required to establish some degree of long lasting immunity. Because the exact age when maternal antibody interference ends varies with the individual puppy and the disease, vaccinations are

typically given every three to four weeks up until 15-17 weeks of age. This means the veterinarian will see each puppy from two to five times during the course of its vaccination series and possibly again if the animal is spayed or neutered as an adolescent.

The first or second vaccination visit often occurs during what is often called the first "fear period." This means a traumatic experience during the visit can have a lasting

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effect on the puppy's behavior. If the vaccination visit is frightening or otherwise overwhelming, the puppy may make negative associations to any variety of stimuli present: the personnel, the clinic, the room, certain odors, instruments, restraint, etc. These associations will vary from puppy to puppy and impact whether this experience generalizes outside the clinic (e.g. to other "strangers"). If the vaccination visits are the puppy's *only* contact with strangers outside the owner's home during the sensitive period, the puppy could easily generalize this fear to *all* strangers.

Puppy visits should be choreographed with the puppy's physical and psychological well-being in mind. At our clinic, owners are encouraged to bring in fecal samples rather than subjecting the puppy to

the stress of acquiring one at the clinic. The temperature is one of the last parts of the physical exam performed rather than the first as is so often done in general clinics. (It's rather *invasive* and *scary*!) The puppy is encouraged to play and food is used liberally as a distraction and reward. Restraint is minimal during all procedures. Within the bounds of good medicine, I alter diagnostic procedures and schedules as much as possible to limit potentially traumatic experiences. The puppy's reaction during subsequent visits is our report card on how well we did during the previous ones.

During the first couple visits, the veterinarian also has the opportunity to discuss general health issues including diseases that may be specific to the breed. Similarly, behavioral characteristics can be discussed as well. Unfortunately, many owners buy puppies on impulse or by "fad factor;" they often have little or no knowledge about the behavioral characteristics or requirements of the breed they have chosen. These first visits are a perfect opportunity to begin educating the owner and encouraging the owner to seek further information on the puppy—before trouble begins.

It is also extremely important to discuss socialization during *the very first visit*. Since most puppies are presented at six to eight weeks of age, and the sensitive socialization period only extends up to 12-14 weeks of age, this is not a process that can be postponed. ***By no means should socialization***

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be delayed until after the puppy vaccination series is complete!

Far more puppies will be lost from their homes from behavioral issues than from dying from a puppyhood disease. In my experience, pre- and postnatal health are the largest factors in disease susceptibility in puppies. Puppies from litters with good pre- and postnatal health rarely contract parvovirus during socialization outings, yet I have seen puppies from litters with poor health contract parvovirus without even leaving their homes. Certainly it is the veterinarian's job to help the owner balance necessary socialization outings with unnecessary exposure to areas with potentially concentrated sources of viral spores (e.g. dog parks). Well run puppy classes are a great socialization experience and typically safe.

Serial puppy visits allow the veterinarian to track the puppy's behavioral development. The veterinarian can assess whether the puppy seems to be receiving sufficient and appropriate socialization or whether warning signs of a problem are becoming apparent. The owner can be directed to resources, including a professional trainer, to aid him or her in dealing with the problem promptly.

Veterinarians should discuss spaying and neutering with the owner. Puppies are typically altered around four to eight months of age. Spaying and neutering frequently occur during the "second fear period" which can begin around six months of age. A number of behavioral changes can abruptly occur in dogs during this time. Owners often blame the surgical

procedure for these changes and the veterinarian should warn owners that this is generally a coincidence, not a cause. Having said this, again it is the veterinarian's responsibility to ensure the animal is handled humanely to prevent a negative association during this impressionable time. It is also important that the veterinarian educate the owner about the realistic effects of spaying and neutering. These procedures do have health benefits for dogs. However, owners should understand that spaying and neutering do not *prevent* behavioral problems, nor do those surgical procedures generally fix them. Surgical alteration can affect some sexually dimorphic behaviors (mounting, roaming, marking), but it tends to have minimal effect on other behavior problems—it is not a substitute for appropriate management and training.

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An APDT member since 1995, Lore graduated from Texas A&M University College of Veterinary Medicine (College Station, TX) in 1993, completed a residency in behavior from 1999-2002, and became a diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Behavior in 2002. Lore added a master's degree in 2003 and the CPDT in 2004, and is currently on the faculty at the College. She can be reached at lihaug@aol.com.



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