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Socializing Young Puppies

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JACQUE LYNN SCHULTZ, DIRECTOR, ASPCA SPECIAL PROJECTS

Whether temporarily caring for the offspring of a rescued pregnant stray or fostering a litter of neonate pups for your local shelter until they are old enough for adoption, the task of properly socializing these new canine “sponges” falls on your shoulders.



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Puppies are born with abilities that barely extend beyond suckling and sleeping. During the first few weeks, they pile on one another in an attempt to conserve body heat and paddle over to the nearest teat for nourishment. The dam (mother dog) relegates herself to the whelping box to provide warmth and nutrition, as well as protection to her new charges, leaving the nest only to eat and eliminate. Caretakers must realize that maternal aggression can rear its ugly head with some moms, so keep visitors down to one or two adult family members for the first three weeks when puppies are most vulnerable.

At three weeks of age, puppies are now mobile with all senses firing. If mom dog continues to show aggression at this stage, you are well-advised to put her away when neighbors and prospective adopters arrive—both for their safety and to ensure proper socialization. A growling, overprotective mom is not a good role model for her impressionable youngsters. However, early meetings between pups and gentle people of all sizes, ages, sexes, and colors will build positive associations that last a lifetime. Here’s when puppies learn that people are fun, not frightening. As the pups get comfortable, the handling and noise can become more intense. Soon they learn to enjoy the clumsy handling and infectious giggles of human youngsters and not to fear tall men in dark glasses.

It’s a Hard-Knock Life

Resist the temptation to puppy-proof an environment to the point of creating an empty, sterile box. The youngster who gets to walk on several types of flooring (wood, linoleum, carpet squares) and explore milk crates, boxes, and tunnel-like structures will be better prepared for life’s obstacles. Stumbling and tumbling over a wire rack prepares puppies to walk confidently on sidewalk grating, and slick linoleum isn’t all that different from a slippery marble-floored lobby.

Strange noises can be intimidating to overprotected pups. If the puppies are housed in a quiet back room, set up a tape player to play normal household noises: doorbells ringing, vacuum cleaners running, doors slamming, toilets flushing, music playing. Start out at a low volume and over time raise it to a real-life level. Bring the puppies to different rooms so they can hear the noises and acoustics of various spaces. Take them for a pleasure ride in the car to expose them to outdoor sights, sounds, and smells. Further widen their horizons by taking them for an outdoor walk in your arms one at a time if weather permits. From four to twelve weeks of age, they will quickly absorb any and all new information.

Rearing Orphan Annie

If you have rescued an orphan or adopted an underage pup (ideally, a puppy should not leave her mother and littermates until eight to ten weeks of age), it will be your responsibility to make sure she learns how to be a dog. When bottle-feeding an orphan, teach her how to deal with frustration by removing the bottle before

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