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Puppy Vaccination and Early Socialization Should Go Together

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TO: My Colleagues in Veterinary Medicine:

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 early learning and socialization experiences with other puppies/dogs, with children/adults and with various environmental situations during this optimal period from birth to 16 weeks of age.

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. These socialization classes should enroll puppies from 8 to 12 weeks of age as a key part of any Wellness Program to improve the bond between pets and their people and increase retention of dogs in their first puppy home. (See -- JAVMA, Vol 223, No. 1, pages 61-66, 2003)

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 should 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 relatively free of natural exposure by good hygiene and relatively clean environments.

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 virus disease is far less than the much higher risk of a dog dying (euthanasia) because of a behavior problem. In my judgment, veterinarians should team up with breeders, qualified trainers (CPDT) and qualified behaviorists (ACVB or CAAB) to recommend early learning and socialization activities, programs and classes for puppies during the optimum period from birth to 16 weeks of age and then continuing throughout the life of the dog. We need to recognize that this special sensitive period for learning is the best opportunity we have to influence behavior of puppies and dogs as 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 classes, beginning after the first series of vaccines when puppies are 8 to 9 weeks of age. However, we must respect an individual veterinarian's professional judgment, in individual cases or situations, where special circumstances warrant further immunization for a special puppy before enrolling in early learning and socialization classes between 8 and 12 weeks of age. Please note that during any period of delay for entering puppy classes, owners should begin a substitute wellness program of early socialization with children, adults, other animals and environmental stimuli outside their family, to take advantage of this special period in a puppy's life. We recommend these activities include planning with appropriate scientific knowledge and consideration for any concerns of the puppy's veterinarian and family.

Please remember that the risk of a dog dying (euthanasia) because of behavior problems is more than 1,000 times the risk of dying of distemper or parvo virus. Early learning, socialization of puppies and appropriate vaccination should go together in a wellness program designed to protect lives of dogs and improve the bond with families.

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

Revised 2-10-04 - Robert K. Anderson DVM, MPH, DACVPM and DACVB ander160@umn.edu