



The Vexed Question of Puppy Socialisation and Vaccination

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I was speaking to a friend recently who had decided that trying to give up smoking was just too difficult. “Anyway”, she assured me, “my Granny smoked like a trooper and lived until she was 92. I think all this hysteria about smoking related illnesses is ridiculous.”

What does this have to do with socialisation and vaccination?? I think there are similarities in the above story and the problems that persist in encouraging early socialisation of puppies. It is well recognised that a small amount of experience during a pup’s critical socialisation period, can have a large impact on future behaviour. Why then, can it sometimes be difficult to convince our colleagues and clients that providing a wide range of positive experiences for young puppies is highly beneficial?

Some of our clients have owned a pup (or have a friend of a friend who owned a pup!) that developed Parvovirus and died, a few days after going for a run in the park. They surmise that all would have been well if only the owners had been caring enough to keep the dog at home! In actual fact, this is a very dangerous assumption to make.

Other clients may know of a dog who has a wonderful temperament. The dog never left the house between coming home from the breeder and two weeks after his last vaccination at 16 weeks of age. These clients might assume that all this mumbo jumbo about socialisation for puppies is over-rated hype.

The crux of the problem is that when we discuss the issue of appropriate vaccination and socialisation schedules for puppies, we are really concerned with *relative risk* and *probability*. I cannot be certain that my client’s puppy will grow into a confident, well adjusted adult dog if they take it to an excellent puppy socialisation programme and continue the good work at home. However, I can say that their puppy will have a *greater probability* of developing those desirable qualities, than another pup denied these experiences at this critical age. Just as my friend’s doctor cannot guarantee she will not develop lung cancer if she quit smoking, he can only advise her *relative risk* of developing cancer is reduced.

The lack of absolute certainty as to the benefits of good socialisation for any *particular* puppy is a difficult hurdle in itself. Then add many clients’ major concerns about disease risk and there is a recipe for clients isolating their pups in droves!

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It is unfortunate that clients can have a false sense of security about keeping puppies isolated prior to completing their puppy vaccination course. Strictly isolating a puppy from other dogs and strangers will not prevent exposure to all of the diseases that are vaccinated for e.g. Parvovirus is very hardy and can spread in a variety of ways including on shoes and clothing. This situation reminds me of those shop assistants who also wander in a sea of ignorant bliss. You know the ones - they carefully make your sandwich with a gloved hand. They then accept your grubby change into that gloved hand before going on to make the next customer's sandwich ☹!

No one ever wants to witness a pup suffering from one of the viral diseases that can be prevented by vaccination. The most recently developed vaccines allow a final puppy injection as early as 10 weeks of age. However, the critical period of socialisation is accepted as 3-12 weeks of age. Deferring exposure to the big wide world, until that 10 week old injection has had a chance to take effect, is clearly still problematic.

Viral infection that results in clinical signs in puppies is most commonly dramatic, has a sudden onset and can be fatal. Behavioural problems are most commonly slower to develop, have a less defined cause and can also be fatal. The difference in progression of these problems can incorrectly make viral diseases seem a more urgent concern for puppy owners than socialisation. It is understandable that some veterinarians also worry that if they recommend early socialisation, and a puppy does contract a viral illness, then the client may incorrectly assume the veterinarian did not give the most appropriate advice. Good communication and client education is obviously the key here. The fact is that more dogs are euthanased for behavioural problems than die from all of the viral diseases combined.

I fear that it sometimes frustrates trainers that I can't provide a "black and white" template for vaccination and concurrent socialisation. The risk of contracting Parvovirus, Distemper, Hepatitis and so forth will vary from one area to another and from one time period to another. For this reason, it is not appropriate to make absolute recommendations about vaccination regimes and socialisation recommendations. However, it is true to say that the standard advice, given many years ago to veterinarians about isolating all puppies until they have had all of their puppy shots, has been superseded.

Speak with veterinarians in your area about this issue and encourage them to contact the Special Interest Group of the Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) - the Australian Veterinary Behaviour Interest Group (AVBIG), if they want further information from within the profession on this issue.

Relative risk isn't necessarily an easy concept for clients to understand. However, it is imperative we can educate them about the perils of not vaccinating and not socialising their puppies. My friend may live to 92 if she keeps smoking; but she is more likely to make it that far if she quits. Your client's puppies may make it to their second birthday without vaccination or socialisation, but the probability of them making it that far and beyond (but perhaps not to 92!) is far greater if they are vaccinated and socialised appropriately.

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