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# STEVE AND VICKI AUSTIN

CANINE TRAINING AND BEHAVIOUR EDUCATIONAL COURSES

## Puppy Socialisation During COVID-19

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# Socialisation During COVID-19 Restrictions

We've been contacted by numerous new puppy owners worrying about not being able to provide sufficient enjoyable social and environmental experiences during the puppy's critical or sensitive developmental phases, due to restrictions in place during the current pandemic.

Don't panic! Even in the tightest restrictions of complete lockdown, there is so much we can do at home. Please ensure that your puppy will be enjoying new experiences, rather than creating fears and anxieties that can last a lifetime and be resistant to treatment once the puppy is an adolescent or adult. Here's how:

- Allow the puppy to first experience something new at a distance, reduced volume or reduced intensity. Only increase the stimulus as the puppy is comfortable to do so.
- When puppy notices something; a sound, a moving object, anything new; use your happy voice to indicate that you have noticed it too and are completely comfortable it.
- Allow the puppy to approach a new object, rather than bringing the object closer to puppy.
- Never force a puppy to move closer to something with which he is not yet comfortable. Allow him to move to the end of the lead or the other side of the room. Knowing he can move away or escape will give him confidence to try to approach again sooner than later.

## Sounds and Other Environmental Stimuli

- Download [Amy Smith's Sound Proof Puppy app](#) and follow the instructions.
- Use whatever is available at your home, but as always, take care that you don't scare the puppy. Always test the puppy's reaction to a new sound or stimuli at a low volume or at a distance to observe their initial reaction.

Hair-dryer	Washing machine	Door-bell	Noisy toys
Television	Vacuum cleaner	Lawn mower	Whipper Snipper
Sneezing	Loud laughter	Squeals	Steam iron (shoosh of steam)
Whistles	Slamming doors	Musical instruments	Rattling pots and pans
Garbage trucks	Your car horn	Stomping	Wheelie bins
Bikes	Skateboards	Prams	Get creative!

## **Surfaces**

Carpet, tiles, floorboards, linoleum, grass, wet grass, concrete, pavers, pebbles, sand, tarmac, tarpaulin, plastic bags, cushions. If you are still allowed to go out with your puppy (check your local restrictions), you should be able to find all of these surfaces easily. But even if you're locked-up at home, you'll have many and be able to create others. Get creative: throw some tin foil on the floor, set up a race track on the back veranda where the puppy has to negotiate strange objects such as luggage, a tin box an empty plant pot, kids' toys, etc.

## **People**

- If you're not in full lockdown, get your puppy out and about to see various forms of people at the social distancing space. Honestly, this is a better scenario than direct interaction for most puppies because they can become comfortable in the close presence of people without the social pressure of direct interaction. Get into the habit of greeting all and sundry with a pleasant "good morning/afternoon" – you'll be setting the scene for your puppy. Our family is friendly and socially competent.
- If you're not allowed out, time to get creative again. Pull out heavy winter jackets and hats, sunglasses and sunhats, wet weather gear, gumboots, work boots, stilettos, footy boots. Take it easy; we don't want to scare puppy! Even if you are still taking your puppy out, these suggestions are still good experience for your puppy.
- Now think about the range of human behaviour that dogs might find difficult. A common uncomfortable experience for dogs is people who reach straight in to pet the top of the dog's head. Often it is people who are not entirely comfortable with dogs, or perhaps scared of them. Reaching in over the top of the dog's head could be interpreted by the dog as a threatening behaviour and if the dog is on-lead and feels unable to move away, he may feel the need to defend himself – not good!

Instead, we can teach our puppies that it is not threatening; it's just a fun game. Starting with people with whom the puppy is very familiar, reach in over the puppy's head and pet the top of his head, then giggle and deliver a food treat.

Start gently and then gradually increase to more robust actions of pulling coat, ears, tail and then laugh and deliver a food treat. Remember you don't want to scare the puppy; take it easy!

Now try some silly walks; not straight at the puppy initially. What about a limp? A walking stick? Dancing? Bouncing around like a highly excited child? Creeping? Rushing around? Skipping?

Now think of some of the things we carry around. Plastic shopping bags, green enviro bags, luggage, boxes, wheelie bags, wheelie bins, vacuum cleaners, car keys, laptop bags.

- The usual handling exercises that prepare puppies for the odd things that vets and groomers might do, can still be done at home. Include, the mouth, ears, eyes, feet, abdominal area. If the puppy shows a dislike for any of these areas being handled, pair with a food-treat. He'll soon like it!

## **Other Dogs and Puppies**

This aspect of socialisation is perhaps not as important as many new puppy owners believe. If you're still able to take your puppy out into the world, he can interact directly with another dog or puppy on lead, while the owners observe social distancing at the ends of their respective leads. However, choose your puppy's canine social acquaintances wisely! Socially incompetent dogs that want to rush towards you and your puppy will potentially give your puppy a bad experience.

Rushing towards another social animal, be it person or dog/puppy, is inappropriate social behaviour; do not allow your puppy to practice this form of greeting. Do not take your puppy to off-lead dog parks.

If you're in total lockdown at home, you could try to utilise the television. Dogs are able to see our modern televisions. If you see your puppy notice other dogs barking in your neighbourhood, praise him and laugh as if it's an enjoyable sound.

## **Other Animals**

Socialising your puppy to other species is going to be difficult if you cannot go out and you don't have other species at home. Again, you could try the television. You could use recorded sounds of other animals. If you don't have any animals at home, perhaps a cat-owning friend could post their cat's bedding to you for the puppy to investigate and become familiar. You'll need to think outside the square!

## **Let's Look at Something Specific: Vacuum Cleaners**

Consider each component of the vacuum cleaner that could be scary to the puppy:

- Size and shape

- Presence
- Noise
- The hose (could be considered snake-like)
- The sucky noise at the head
- Your movement when vacuuming
- The way it follows you around
- The electrical cord

Your individual puppy might not be worried about any of these aspects initiated at a low level. Or, your individual puppy might be worried about every aspect of the vacuum cleaner. You'll need to use your observational skills for the puppy in front of you.

As always; start at the easiest possible level and gradually progress at the puppy's comfort.

**Step 1** Pull the vacuum cleaner out of its usual storage location when the puppy is not present. Leave the vacuum cleaner at the side of the room where the puppy spends the most of its indoor time with you – probably the living room. The puppy will most likely treat the stationary and quiet vacuum cleaner like any other item in the room. However, if he actively avoids the vacuum cleaner, we need to start pairing food treats with the presence of it: when he looks at the vacuum, say GOOD and then toss a food treat behind the puppy so that he has to move away from the vacuum cleaner to get it. Wait for him to return to the scene and look towards the vacuum cleaner again; mark GOOD and toss the food treat away. Our aim is to have the puppy willingly approach the vacuum cleaner in order to get a treat.

**Step 2** Relocate the vacuum cleaner to various areas of the home where puppy will continue to become comfortable with its usualness. Include the hose, the pipe, the head and the electrical cord. If you need to vacuum during this process, ensure the puppy is well away from the area. Preferably another family member can take the puppy outside of the home.

**Step 3** Randomly move the hose around whilst puppy is observing. Leave it laying around where your puppy will walk over it. Continue to observe puppy's reactions and respond accordingly.

**Step 4** Allow the puppy to observe you picking up the vacuum cleaner and placing it down again a few metres away or in another room that the puppy frequents. Repeat at least ten times. Observe puppy's reactions.

**IT IS UNLIKELY THAT MANY PUPPIES WILL HAVE HAD ANY DIFFICULTY WITH THE  
MERE PRESENCE OF THE VACUUM CLEANER**

However, if your puppy has shown any discomfort or avoidance, you will need  
to pair the presence of the cleaner with food treats as outlined in Step 1.

Step 5        Pair the sound of the vacuum cleaner being started briefly, with a food treat. With the puppy in another room, start the vacuum cleaner briefly at random intervals and immediately give the puppy a food treat. The sound of the vacuum cleaner starting predicts a food treat for puppy. Repeat this at least ten times over a 24 hour period. Then start to leave the cleaner running for varying durations up to ten seconds. Puppy receives treat after treat whilst the cleaner is running, but they abruptly stop when the cleaner stops. Vary intervals between repetitions; anywhere from a few seconds up to several hours

Step 6        Once you can see your puppy is expectantly looking for food treats whenever the vacuum cleaner starts up, you can repeat the process in Step 5 closer to the actual vacuum cleaner, perhaps in the room next to where the vacuum cleaner is located. Observe your puppy for signs that he is anything less than confident. You may need to take a backward step.

*Signs of stress could include yawning, lip licking, heavy panting, darting eyes and taking the food from your hand more roughly than usual.*

Step 7        Gradually move closer to the vacuum cleaner if the puppy is keen to do so. Continue pairing the cleaner running with food treats. At this stage the cleaner still remains stationary whilst running.

Step 8        If your puppy is completely comfortable being next to the stationary running vacuum cleaner, briefly pick up the pipe handle and give continuous food treats to the puppy whilst holding the pipe. Return the pipe to the floor and cease food treats. Repeat at random intervals over a day or two.

Step 9        As always, only progress if your puppy is absolutely confident with all previous steps. Whilst the vacuum cleaner is running, pick up the pipe in the usual vacuuming manner, but make your movements gentle, toss a food treat to your puppy after each movement. Gradually increase the intensity and duration of your vacuuming before tossing a food treat.

Step 10        Whilst vacuuming your home in the usual way, toss your puppy a food treat at random intervals, gradually reducing the number of food treats given.

**Congratulations! Your puppy is now completely comfortable around the vacuum cleaner.**