

Raising a Performance Litter

by Jan Weiher, VMD

I have a new respect for breeders. I knew breeding would be a lot of work, but didn't realize just how much work it would take to raise and properly socialize a litter. On top of that, I decided to jump in with both feet, and bred two litters at one time!

Pups from these litters will hopefully go on to compete in conformation, agility, and in the field. My goal was to prepare them to be adaptable and confident in new and varied situations. The socialization process involved exposing them to numerous environments and experiences in the few short weeks that I had them.

Bounce-back (the ability to recover quickly from a stimulus) is one of the most valuable traits for a dog to learn, whether it is a performance dog, show dog, or a family companion. Proper exposure to a variety of stimuli during the critical socialization periods gives the pup the experience of becoming afraid and then recovering. The more the pup recovers, the less bothered it will be later in life when confronted with new or frightening things.

From very early on, my puppies experienced a variety of sights, sounds, and textures. By 7 weeks they had been exposed to sounds including those from the vacuum, TV, radio, clanging pots, fallen baby gates, lawnmower, wind chimes, car horn, air compressor, and barking dogs. They had walked on a variety of surfaces including carpet, tile, wood, plastic, stone, gravel, mulch, concrete, grass, sand, and hay. They had been for rides in the car, had met adults (both men and women), the elderly, and children, as well as horses, goats, cats, and other dogs. They had eaten from metal, plastic,



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Above photo and photo page 60 by Diane Dittrich. Left and below photos and photo page 60 courtesy of Jan Weiher.

and ceramic bowls, and in various places- crate, ex-pen, kitchen, porch, car, and yard. They had played with objects of differing textures- fleece, vinyl, wood, metal, rope, fuzzy, and squeak toys, rubber balls, balls with a rattle, and cardboard boxes. They had been on the grooming table regularly, and had learned to use a dog door.

As soon as the pups started eating solid food, I used a clicker just prior to feeding. The pups quickly learned that the sound of the click meant something good was coming!

Clicker training can be used to shape behavior even in young pups (see recommended reading for more information.) Long story short - using clicker training, the pups quickly learned to offer a sit when they wanted something (e.g. to get out of the ex-pen, a toy, or meals.)

Early exposure to agility equipment started at about 5 weeks, as soon as the pups had developed a little coordination. Since they were too small to use the stairs, the first "obstacle" was a ramp off the back stoop into the yard.



They also learned to play on a wobble board - a 2'x2' plywood board with a beveled wooden block bolted to the center on the underside. The motion and sound of the board hitting the concrete prepares them for performing the teeter later on. A nylon children's tunnel and an agility table top without the base proved great fun to play in and on. The pups quickly developed confidence on a sway bridge despite its insecure footing (2'x4' plywood plank suspended a few inches off the ground by chains). Walking/ trotting over jump bars placed on the ground close together (similar to cavaletti exercises with horses) develops body awareness

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and coordination.

To get an early start on housebreaking, at around 3 weeks, I put a piece of sod on a plastic tray within the ex-pen next to the sleeping area. Whenever I'd see a pup wake up and start moving around, I'd immediately place it on the sod to eliminate. Persistence paid off, and by 5 weeks the pups more often than not were seeking out the sod for their "potty area". It made cleanup easier, and I also think it kept the puppies cleaner as they were not defecating in their play area. The sod needed to be changed every few days, but I would switch it out with a few pieces that had been hosed in the yard. (Hint: cut sod seemed to work better for odor control, but grass plugs in growing trays held together better against chewing pups!)

To get the pups accustomed to being in a crate, at about 7 weeks I began to separate the litter during down time (when they were not out playing.) I had adjacent ex-pens, so they could see each other. Each ex-pen was placed on a cheap indoor/outdoor carpet for footing, and held a small crate with the door left open, a piece of sod, and a variety of toys and chews.

At 7 weeks I also exposed the pups individually to domestic rabbits. Most approached the rabbit with curiosity at first, but once the rabbit started to move, you could see the light bulb switch on



and the chase began. I was especially excited by the pups that gave voice during their short pursuit, and even more so by the ones that seemed to search once the rabbit was out of direct sight. There is no saying how well this might predict future hunting ability, but it sure was fun to watch. (Note: no rabbits were harmed during this test) On a separate occasion, and not associated with rabbits, I also exposed

them to gunfire from a starter pistol.

At 9 weeks we took a trip to a local agility trial. This provided a wonderful introduction to a large number of people and dogs, along with the sounds and close quarters of an indoor show. The pups had already received their first vaccination, and I felt the benefit of

the experience outweighed the small chance of exposure to disease in this type of venue.

At 10 weeks the pups started moving on to their new homes. It was a bittersweet goodbye - I do miss them, but I was ready to get back to some sense of normalcy!

Recommended reading/ viewing:

Another Piece of the Puzzle:

Puppy Development -

Pat Hastings & Erin Ann Rouse

Puppy Puzzle (DVD) - Evaluating structural quality of puppies -

Pat Hastings

Also by Karen Pryor:

Don't Shoot the Dog!

The New Art of Teaching and Training

Getting Started:

Clicker Training for Dogs

Clicker Magic-

The Art of Clicker Training (DVD)

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