

Thinking Ahead for Agility

OUT AND ABOUT WITH YOUR PUPPY

By Catherine Steinke, photos by Mike Anderson

It's the morning of your young dog's first trial and a light rain is falling. You're not too worried because slippery grass and wet equipment have never bothered him. He is just as fast on rainy days as he is on sunny ones. You know this is going to be a good day. You walk your dog toward the tent where the measuring table is, thinking of how far your training has come. Suddenly, while you are waiting for his first height check, some children race past you and pop open an umbrella! How does your dog react?

Funny things happen on trial days. Tents fall over, judges wear weird hats, and trains toot their horns when passing the show grounds. Families bring children who carry food, drop things, and shriek. Your dog's response to all these unpredictable sights and sounds is determined very early in his life.

Developmental research by Scott and Fuller showed that by the time a puppy is 12 to 16 weeks old, his general approach to life is permanently set. That means you don't have much time to influence his viewpoint once you bring him home. After four months of age, your puppy might learn to accept strange and scary things, but it takes a tremendous amount of work on your part. For certain dogs, it's impossible to change their fear of new things. Still, if you start early, you can help your puppy see the world as an exciting place to explore, not a place filled with creepy monsters. Exposing your puppy early to our erratic world is critical if you want a dog that is unflappable on trial day.

Assuming you get your puppy around eight weeks of age, you have just one or two months in which to convince him that life is fun when weird things happen. Prioritize your puppy's needs, especially if your daily training time is limited. Training the weave poles or a target now isn't going to make him a great agility dog. His overall confidence on the course will make the difference. If your puppy is not completely at ease with everything he might see at an agility trial, he will not be a

successful competitor. Foundation work and obstacle training can wait a bit. Your window for influencing your puppy's resiliency to change and his acceptance of sights, sounds, and people is quickly closing. So, what should you do?

Socializing in New Places

To make the most of this early opportunity, plan to get your puppy out to new places at least three times every week after he has had his first set of immunizations. Sensitive puppies need even more adventures; they need daily outings. When you are running errands or going to work without your puppy, scout for new places to take him next. Find statues of animals, flapping flags, playgrounds with children, construction zones, and nursing homes. Stand in front of a department store or treat yourself to coffee at an outdoor cafe, and bring your puppy. Go where the action is, a soccer match, a festival, a parade. Don't just think about agility trial scenarios. Broaden your puppy's world as much as possible so that nothing he might encounter at an agility trial could even cause a stress-induced nose lick.

When you go to a new place, make sure your puppy has an appetite and take 20 "sensible cookies" with you. A sensible cookie is a bit of freeze-dried liver or a small chunk of tasty jerky that your puppy receives for acting sensibly while approaching something or someone new. As your puppy encounters a stranger happily, feed him a treat. When he notices a flapping flag and approaches it, tell him how bright he is and feed him. If a sudden noise occurs, speak happily, "Yippee, did you hear that," and pop a sensible cookie in his mouth. Pretty soon, your puppy will be as excited as you are when unexpected things happen. When you have spent all 20 sensible cookies, pack up your puppy and go home.

Most of your socialization adventures should be short; 20 minutes is plenty for an already confident puppy. For sensitive

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puppies, shorter, more frequent outings are better. You want your puppy to look forward to finding new things, so always leave when he's wanting more. About once a week, take your puppy to a longer event (at least an hour) where he can just hang out with you while the world goes by. This builds patience and endurance. Sit on the ground with your puppy and teach him to relax. You can gently massage your puppy and help him settle himself in a busy environment. On this outing, your sensible cookies will need to be very small and tasty, and you'll need more of them. Some puppies enjoy working for an entire meal in this fashion. You can use his regular puppy food, one kibble at a time, but "season" it with chunks of cooked chicken or hamburger mixed in for special flavor.

Keeping a Record

The first week, you'll remember every outing clearly. After that, if you are normal, your head will get a bit muddled with details. Has your puppy seen a balloon? Did you try meeting teenaged boys at dusk? What about hats? How many different kinds has he seen? Since it's often difficult to remember, it's helpful to use a checklist and a training journal.

On your checklist, keep track of the various types of people your puppy meets. Find men, women, and children of various ethnic origins to expose your puppy to. Seek out men with beards, women in skirts. Boys and girls approach and pet puppies differently. Has your puppy been petted by lots of children? Be sure to meet people of all age groups; toddlers, 'tweens, and teens look and move uniquely. Physically challenged people using wheelchairs and walkers should be part of your puppy's normal world. Look for people who stare. An agility judge can seem pretty scary if your puppy has never had someone staring at him and "stalking" him!

Your checklist should include many different kinds of places as well. Find a walking trail, a bus station, a busy street. An airport concourse, a farm, and a boat dock provide many different things to see and do. Has your puppy walked downtown? Seen ducks on a pond? Heard a helicopter overhead? Be sure to visit all types of places before your puppy turns 16 weeks old. Go out at different times of the day; shadows can be frightening. Your puppy should happily experience different lighting in new places to prevent fears from developing. Make notes in your training journal about your visits.

Your training journal is also where you keep track of how your

outing went. It should include the time of day you visited. Take your puppy for walks in the daytime and the dark, too. In your journal, keep track of your puppy's body language at various places. Was his tail up? Did he startle at a new sight? If so, how long did it take him to recover? If you find that your puppy was spooked by a particular type of encounter, you must create more opportunities to gently work through his fear.

Reading Your Pup's Body Language

It's not good taking your puppy out and about if all you are doing is convincing him that the world is indeed a frightening place. You need to become an expert at reading your puppy's body language, so that you know how he is feeling in a given situation. (My favorite body language book is Brenda Aloff's *Canine Body Language: A Photographic Guide*.) Watch your puppy's ears, tail, and body position. Generally, forward and up is confidence. Low and tight is not. Look for overall tension: a sign that "flight or fight" is in action. A tucked tail, wide eyes, and a backpedaling body say "Too much, too fast, too soon!"

If you are seeing fear or stress in your puppy, move him to a position where he can win. Increase the distance from the cause of the fear and try to jolly your puppy by playing with him. Your puppy will look to you for cues on how to behave. Laugh, squint your eyes, take deep cleansing breaths. Get him to loosen his body through a game of tickles or by tugging on a rope toy. If your puppy shakes off (as though wet), praise him enthusiastically. He's just said, "Whew! Now I'm okay!" Next time, start farther away and only bring him closer if he is not

showing signs of stress. It's better to move into a new situation slowly and build his confidence than to overwhelm him. You always want to convince your puppy that if he startles, you know he will recover. Above all, you want him to trust you to keep him safe.

If your puppy is quite shy, a confident older dog can be a great asset to your training. See if another handler will walk the dauntless role model ahead of you. With your puppy on leash, allow him to totter behind, observing how a "real dog" handles these situations. Praise your puppy with your hands and voice, but do not distract him from watching. A sensitive puppy can learn a great deal from a bolder, adult dog simply by following along. Be sure your chosen "leader" dog is completely at ease in any environment and friendly with all people before you head out. If the older dog exhibits shyness, your puppy's fears will be confirmed.



Brad and puppy Rudy meet David with an umbrella.



Brad shows puppy Rudy the umbrella.

Taking a Puppy Socialization Class

Additionally, before bringing your new puppy home, find a puppy socialization class taught by a positive instructor and attend a session as an observer. Be sure that the instructor is providing many experiences, not just training obedience or agility foundations. A good socialization class is noisy and colorful, filled with a variety of sights, sounds, smells, and adventures. Also, in the well-managed class, the instructor will keep puppies safe during interactions with people, other puppies, and any equipment or props. A good puppy class instructor will teach you how to increase your puppy's confidence around costumes, veterinary staff, other dogs, children, and, of course, umbrellas.

If you are unable to find a puppy socialization class near you while your puppy is young enough to benefit from it, consider having some friends over for a puppy party once a week. Dr. Ian Dunbar calls it a puppy party when friends are invited into your home to interact with your puppy in a safe and friendly manner. Be sure each experience is positive for your puppy by feeding sensible cookies at every opportunity. You can have your guests dress in a variety of costumes, uniforms, and hats. Set up challenges for your puppy such as a veterinary exam, a grooming experience, a person's clumsy pats. Have your puppy

climb onto a wobble board, experience different surfaces, and go through a small tunnel. Play a CD of barking dogs, crying babies, traffic sounds, and fireworks. In general, make a great effort to expose your puppy to everything he is likely to encounter in his lifetime, before he turns 16 weeks old.

In the End...

Going back to your dog's first agility trial, he hears the children laugh and sees them hold the umbrella high. The measuring judge says, "Next." You glance at your dog and he's looking up at you, wagging his tail gently. He's "been there, done that" and he's never been more relaxed. He's completely comfortable with the hubbub and confusion because you showed him the world is a fun place from the very start. You ask him to jump onto the table and he happily obeys. It's going to be a good day—and you knew it. 🐾

Catherine Steinke owns Sensible K9, LLC in Indianapolis, Indiana, and has instructed dog owners for over 10 years. She is writing a puppy class curriculum and owner's guide called Sensible Puppy. Catherine competes in agility with a sensible Golden Retriever (the farm truck) and a silly Vizsla (the Ferrari). She's a homeschooling mother of two active boys and the wife of one patient man. Contact her at Catherine@SensibleK9.com.

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