



Puppy classes and adult dog behaviour: A research review by Julie T Daniels

## ***Association between puppy classes and adulthood behaviour of the dog.***

Gonzalez-Martinez, A., Martinez, M.F., Rosado, B., Luno, I., Santamarina, G., Suarez, M.L., Camino, F., de la Cruz, L.F. and Dieguez, F.J. 2019 J. Vet. Behav. 32: 36-41.

### **Research topic:**

When puppies join training classes it is usually during a very important stage in their development. This stage is often called the 'socialisation period'. This is because it is during this time puppies can most easily make bonds with new people and other animals. It is also a time where puppies are generally more accepting of the new sights, sounds and smells of everyday life. It has long been thought that puppies not appropriately socialised during this important time can grow up to become dogs who are fearful in unfamiliar situations such as greeting visitors and other dogs. Since this socialisation window closes for many puppies by the time they are 13 weeks of age, what happens in class during and after this period may leave a lasting impression on them. This could be good or bad. Therefore, the emphasis of modern, progressive puppy classes is on providing positive, welfare-friendly experiences rather than focussing solely on obedience. However, there has been limited research looking at the influence of puppy class attendance on future adult dog behaviour. Therefore, the research paper that will be presented here may be of interest to owners considering the value of attending puppy classes, to veterinary practices offering puppy parties and for dog trainers running puppy classes.

### **Study aim:**

Gonzalez-Martinez and colleagues asked the question, 'Does puppy class attendance influence adult dog behaviour?'

### **How the study was done:**

The research involved 80 dogs. Approximately half of them attended a six-week puppy course (at the same location) with their owners. Fifteen puppies started classes when they were less than 3 months old, while 17 started when they were juveniles of between 3 and 9 months of age. The weekly classes were held at the same time and run by the same person. Every class provided supervised play, short positive reinforcement training sessions, rest, interaction with different people and ended with off lead supervised play. Twelve months later, the dogs' owners completed a questionnaire, known as C-BARQ, where 100 questions were asked about various dog behaviours. Statistical analysis (tests that compare sets of data to see if there are differences between them) were performed to identify any correlation between puppy class attendance and future behaviour.

### **What the study found:**

In this study, attendance of puppy classes was found have NO EFFECT on the dogs':

- aggression towards their owners
- aggression towards strangers or other dogs
- fear of other dogs
- experience of separation-related problems
- fear of strangers

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- attention seeking behaviour
- chasing behaviours when compared to the dogs who had not attended puppy classes.

However, in this study, dogs that had attended puppy classes WERE FOUND TO BE:

- more trainable
- less fearful of loud noises, novel objects and situations
- got on better with other dogs at home
- less sensitive about being touched when compared to the dogs who had not attended puppy classes.

## **What the authors concluded:**

Puppy classes may positively influence some types of adult dog behaviour.

## **Things to consider about this study:**

*Please note, this is not meant to be exhaustive, rather a few points of interest will be mentioned.*

The experiences that puppies have while they are young, together with traits they inherit from their parents, will influence how they behave as adult dogs. Hence, nature and nurture both have important roles to play. This research paper appears to support the idea that puppies can gain some benefits from being taken to classes where some aspects of their development are positively nurtured. However, there were also some findings that did not support this idea. For example, puppy class attendance was not found to prevent future fear of, or aggression towards, strangers amongst the dogs studied. Nor did puppy class attendance protect against aggression towards, or fear of, unfamiliar dogs. Perhaps this could have been because the puppies were put into classes with other pups of similar size. This may have inadvertently reduced opportunities for the puppies to become sociable with dogs of different shapes and sizes to their own. Alternatively, the owners may have thought that puppy class attendance was sufficient to meet their puppy's socialisation needs so did not actively continue with it outside or beyond classes. Therefore, their dog may have lost any early puppy class socialisation benefits. This was not discussed by the study authors, however, if true this would highlight that puppy classes alone are not enough to grow an emotionally balanced dog. Also, it is worth remembering that a hour puppy class represents 1/168<sup>th</sup> of a puppy's week!

It should also be remembered that the design of a study has a large impact on its findings. For example, the lack of effect (non-statistically significant results) in this behaviour study could have been due factors other than puppy class attendance. For example, the number of dogs studied (80) was very small and equivalent to just 0.008% of the UK's estimated 10 million dogs. Hence, the chances of finding a true correlation between puppy class attendance and adult behaviour were low from the outset. Studying many more dogs would have been expensive and very time consuming, however, had that been possible, the results (either way) would have been stronger. Furthermore, no data was available to the researchers about the life events or the health status of the dogs since finishing the classes. Therefore, other non-related events, such as an unpleasant encounter with another dog, could now be having a greater influence on current adult dog behaviour than whether or not the dog went to puppy classes.

Whilst scientists try to avoid bias in their studies, in reality this is difficult to achieve. For example, this study only collected data from people recruited online, which may attract some dog owners to participate more than others. Immediately the study is then limited to a proportion of the dog owning public which may not be representative of everyone. A survey also requires honest answers

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for the collection of good quality data. Although there was no obvious reason why a participant would not wish to be truthful in this study, important information could have been forgotten or not deemed important to record in the questionnaire. Another positive, and possibly unconscious, bias that could have occurred in this study was an extra emphasis on handling. This is because the puppy classes were held in a veterinary facility where it is in the best interests of dogs and staff for this to be well rehearsed. Nevertheless, this appeared to be good for the puppies, as those attending classes were found to be more tolerant of being touched than dogs not attending classes.

As the study authors recognised, their results may not necessarily apply to other puppy classes because those may be run differently and have a different focus e.g. basic obedience. However, the puppy class practices investigated in this study i.e. careful exposure to novelty and social introductions, emphasis on reward-based training, supervised play and rest appear to have been beneficial to adult dogs in a number of ways. Furthermore, the study suggested that getting owners into the habit of training their puppy early on supported ongoing trainability.

It is possible that future research investigating whether for example, offering the class structure described in this study together with open roll-on, roll-off enrolment (where all puppies are 18 weeks or younger when they start), may provide additional positive influence on adult dog behaviour through careful exposure to a greater number of unfamiliar puppies and people.

## Take home message:

Taking a puppy to welfare-centred classes is an important part of their development. However, growing a puppy into a fulfilled and well-behaved dog needs a lot of effort to continue outside of and beyond puppy classes.

**Link to original article:** <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1558787817302551>

## About the blog author:

Julie Daniels is a certified companion animal behaviourist, professional dog trainer and academic scientist in the field of Regenerative Medicine and Cellular Therapy, where she has veterinary eye disease collaborations. Julie's specialist interest is in working with animal emotions, the critical and often misunderstood key to preventing and resolving problematic animal behaviours. Her knowledge and practical experience comes from her COAPE Diploma, extensive CPD and now her education and research towards an MSc in Clinical Animal Behaviour with the University of Edinburgh. She is a full member of The Association of Pet Dog Trainers (UK), The COAPE Association of Applied Pet Behaviourists and Trainers, the International Companion Animal Network and the Pet Professional Guild. Julie offers training and behaviour modification for dogs and cats in Bedfordshire, UK. If you would like to learn more about how Julie could help you and your pet, click on this link <https://www.thinkingpaws.co.uk> or please feel free to contact her on [juliedaniels@thinkingpaws.co.uk](mailto:juliedaniels@thinkingpaws.co.uk).