

EMOTIONAL SOUNDNESS

Selecting and Developing the Emotionally-Sound Puppy Crucial for its Sociability

By Melissa McMath Hatfield, M.S., CBCA-KA, CDBC

As professionals, we have clients whose philosophies about selecting the best puppy vary. For some, only rescues are considered and, for others, only the purebred puppy will do. Regardless of whether the puppy is brought home from the local shelter or imported from Germany, they all have the same developmental period.

Let's start with the basics. Besides overall good health, nutrition, and training, there is another equally important component: emotional soundness. Without it, the dog will not develop into its fullest potential and may even develop emotional issues. The clinging wall flower may never develop into the social butterfly; the adage, "you can't turn an apple into an orange," comes to mind, and you can't make them "want to want to."

Emotional Soundness

A quick checklist should include the following questions. Does the puppy:

- Freely establish eye contact and enjoy human touch?
- Accept novel stimuli?
- Handle frustration?
- Recover easily from being startled and is quick to forgive?
- Have a natural curiosity?
- Respond to play overtures spontaneously?
- Enjoy and seek human companionship?

Temperament v. Personality

This is often referred to as nature v. nurture. It is important to know the difference, however, since both evolved differently. Temperament is based on genetics, is innate, and is the natural way of responding to the environment, i.e., nature. Temperament is the foundation of the personality. Yet personality is how our temperament (genetics) interacts with the environment, i.e., nurture. Personality traits are present at an early age, are relatively stable over time, and the same response should be expected in future similar situations, throughout the dog's life. (Segurson)

The Svartberg and Forkman Personality Trait Study lists specific traits that are evolutionarily stable and are heritable. They are:

- Playfulness
- Curiosity/Fearlessness
- Chase Proneness
- Sociability and Aggressiveness
- Shyness and Boldness

Shyness is one of the behavior traits most affected by genetics, (Pfaffenberger) so look closely at mom and dad. You need to know, up front, what you are getting. Time and love can cure a lot of problems but not a potential emotionally unsound dog caused by genetics. The expectations and emotional demands for the show ring competitor, hunting dog or working dog are very different from the companion lap dog.

The criteria for selecting an emotionally sound puppy should be an objective observational approach. There are no guarantees, but if you select a dog that passes the following test, your chances are greatly increased. Although there is no way to know if they will thrive in the chosen environment, you sure can be guaranteed the odds of success diminish if they fail these simple tests. Be aware of rationalizations such as, "oh, she just takes a little time to warm up" or similar statements. Dogs communicate in a straightforward and honest manner; what you see is what you get.

After the initial observation the next step in this process is the temperament test, which measures positive emotions such as sociability, stability, confidence, and friendliness, as well as negative emotions such as fearfulness, shyness, anxiety, and aggression. The dog's behavioral response needs an objective description of the behavior rather than a subjective interpretation or rationalizations of the dog's behavior; therefore, the breeder is automatically disqualified from performing the test.



Photo: Shutterstock

If the puppy is old enough to leave its littermates, it is old enough to be tested. A quiet, but neutral, environment with a neutral tester is ideal. There are many temperament tests available to the breeder. Canine Behavioral Assessment and Research Questionnaire (C-BARQ), Safety Assessment for Evaluation Rehoming (SAFER), and the Volhard Puppy Aptitude Test are three excellent choices and easy to administer. These are self-explanatory and can be easily found with a Google search.

Critical Periods of Development

John Paul Scott and John L. Fuller, psychologists, summarized the foundation for critical periods in a puppy's development in their book, *Genetics and the Social Behavior of the Dog* (1965). This classic 13-year study was one of the first and most extensive research studies on dogs and due to their "discovery" of the critical periods in the puppy, it became the foundation in developmental studies in the human.

They found that from birth to the 16th week that even a small exposure from a specific experience could greatly affect the dog for life—the younger the puppy the more significant of an impact on the puppy. The first year can be divided into three periods. The following is a condensed outline:

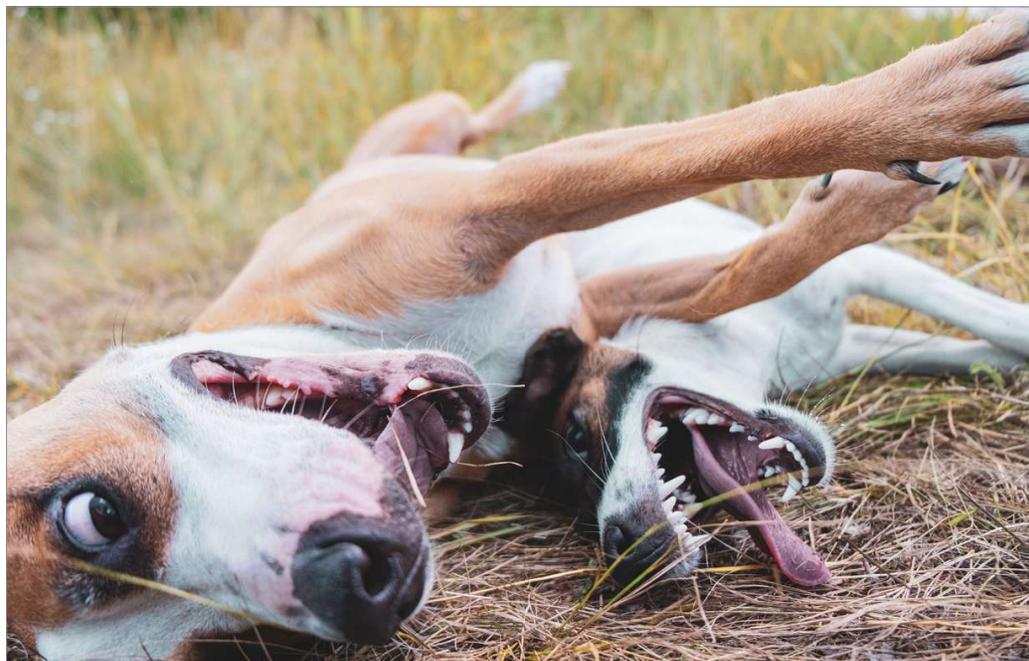
- I. Neonatal: (3-16 days)
- II. Socialization: (4-14 weeks)
 - Canine-Canine Socialization: (3-7 weeks)
 - Canine-Human Socialization Period (7-12 weeks)
 - Fear Impact Period (8-11 weeks)
- III. Enrichment: (14-52 weeks)

What is the puppy's enrichment program? What experiences has the puppy been exposed to? When you bring your puppy home, you have until the 16th week to maximize optimal emotional growth that builds a lifelong emotional and social foundation.

- Enrichment: The 4 E's:
- Explore
 - Examine/Seek
 - Encounter
 - Experience

The 4 E's will be experiences that form the foundation for all other learning, each building on top of each other until the world becomes a safe and predictable place to live and explore. The result is a nonplused, poised, confident puppy.

Unfortunately, a majority of puppies (regardless if they are being primed for a specific task) do not receive this advantage. You can tell as early as 12 weeks those who have a head start and those who have not. These puppies may not necessarily end up with emotional problems later in life, but they certainly will not develop into their full potential. Puppies raised in a kennel environment do not fare well down the road as compared with



puppies started in an enrichment program. Raising puppies in a lackluster routine also puts a puppy at a disadvantage that can be difficult, if not impossible to overcome. So often, the consequences do not manifest until the dog is 18 months to two years of age. It is not uncommon, then, to hear about being surprised at the sudden behavior change in "my normally sweet dog." Multiple intra-species and inter-species experiences are a must for building confidence and developing an emotionally sound dog. As many cross-species experiences as possible should take place during the puppy's first 16 weeks. Cross species social interactions or "meets and greets" build sociability and increase confidence as well as the ability to adapt to multiple changes in the environment.

Sue Sternberg defines *sociable* as the dog's "innate affection for reference and attraction toward humans" and *socialized* as the dog's "early exposure to novel stimuli." For those puppies who have been properly socialized the benefits range from positive behaviors such as:

- Comfortable in new environments
- Communicates well with both dogs and human
- Can ignore nonthreatening stimuli
- Is social and anxious free

For those who have not been socialized the negative behaviors can be:

- Anxiety
- Aggressiveness
- Lacks bite inhibition
- Dog - dog aggression
- Fearful of anything new, including animals, people, and events

A practical example is the startle reflex. An emotionally healthy dog, after being startled, will approach and forgive the offending dog. Are they curious? Do they approach novel stimuli? Seek human contact immediately? "She just hates loud noises" and "after all this is a new environment" are subjective statements and should be a red flag in the assessment.

Since the puppy will be spending up to 9-12 weeks with the breeder and the round of vaccines are not complete, the 4 E's will have to be "in house." There is a lot that can be done, though, to expose the puppy while keeping it safe. Exploring or seeking is one that the dog will need to continue for life — it is mentally stimulating, builds confidence, and physically strengthening. The best way to accomplish this is taking the dog on a smell-the-roses walk and for a puppy, an opportunity to explore outside the nursery, daily.

For indoor enrichment, puppy gyms and enrichment/interactive toys are available on the internet, and different types of footing with multiple textures are easy to accomplish. Create a playroom with multiple toys, shapes, sizes, and sounds. Have as many friends over (young and old) as possible and hopefully there are other household dogs that can come into the nursery for a visit. Taking the puppies on car rides around the block is a fabulous way to start experiencing the movement of the car. Take a few minutes a day to just "be" with each puppy individually. Whether it is playtime (never too young to start teaching fetch) or cuddling, one-on-one is extremely beneficial for you both.

Once the little one has left the nursery (keeping in mind the 4 E's) start the program I call "one-a-day" (like the vitamin). If you miss one you will live (and life will surely get in the way of the best laid plans) but unlike the vitamin, if a day is missed, you can double up. You can offer more than one new experience a day, just as long as you don't overwhelm the little one. Just because you are not exposing them to general public venues or other dogs until the vaccines are complete does not mean that they have to be kept isolated. Going to the bank, a drive-through restaurant where strangers can pet them, sitting on a bench at the mall, visiting nursing homes, schools, riding in elevators, hotel lobbies, having two and four legged friends over, walking to the neighbor's house and making introductions, exposure to the vacuum cleaner and the UPS truck all can be done safely. The advantage is that you can carry or wheel a puppy in a buggy where they are kept safe, physically and emotionally. You are only limited by your imagination.

Staying below threshold

All of this is well and good if done correctly. The little one must always be kept under threshold and never in a situation where he can't retreat, get rescued, or removed. He must never be left in a situation to "figure" it out or with the attitude "he will get over it." If they are showing any signs of stress, anxiety, or fear, i.e., over threshold, they must be removed calmly and quickly as possible. Be aware of rationalizations such as: "oh, it's not that bad" or "she'll get used to it." Learn to "listen with your eyes" by being aware of the dog's calming signals and respond appropriately. Calming signals are telling us that all is not well. There are approximately 30. Some common ones are licking of nose, head turning, sniffing, freezing and yawning. (Rugass, pg. ix). Keep each new experience natural, flowing from one event to the other, thus building on their original 4 E foundation.

Spending their first 16 weeks learning that the world is a safe place, they should be emotionally and physically secure. Multiple positive experiences as early as possible under threshold can help in creating the ideal companion dog. Multiple negative experiences over threshold can affect the dog's confidence, create anxiety, and, if stressful enough, can be permanent.

For Those Who Missed Early Socialization

For those who missed their window of opportunity during their critical period either due to neglect, isolation, or restriction can find themselves in rescues, shelters, or in more dire situations. Lack of early intra-species and inter-species socialization certainly is a serious factor when selecting a puppy for emotional soundness, as the lifelong consequences can be significant in altering the personality and overall emotional stability.

It was once believed that after the 16th week the window of opportunity was closed, hence the term “critical period” of development. However, all is not lost, as the research in neuroscience has shown that the dog’s brain is not stagnant, and the dog can learn and explore well into old age. He may not be the dog that he could have been if given adequate early human/dog interaction, but accommodations can be made to help him in his adjustment and quality of life. Just think smaller exposures and in a longer time frame. Often the hardest thing to overcome is not with the dog but with the pet parent. The game plan should be “to do nothing.” This dog will need time to adjust to living in a new environment with new rules and expectations.

If there has been abuse, neglect, or trauma the main thing you can offer is an environment where the dog can decompress. This may take up to six months or more. I adopted an 18-month-old Boxer off the show circuit and it took him more than a year to have the confidences to interact in a relaxed and friendly manner. Surely his temperament was not conducive to the environment in which he was expected to function. However, adopting the “do nothing” protocol does not mean he is not being taught basic life skills of living with and around humans and possibly other household pets. Otherwise, unless the dog has initiated contact or showed interest just let him be. Time, love and patience can go a long way in helping him adjust to his new world. Problems arise when the pet parent tries too hard and expects too much too fast. Sometimes these are the dogs that are the happiest living in a smaller more predictable environment.

Just go back to the 4 E’s while staying below threshold as your guide. The very fact you have provided a safe place, a routine and a predictable environment is a rehabilitation protocol in and of itself. Don’t expect a cuddle buddy or interaction within the family to come naturally or quickly. This develops on the dogs own timetable, not yours.

Summary

Dogs communicate with humans in an honest and straightforward manner, but we have to listen with our eyes and our hearts. If they are happy and freely interacting within their environment and with others (two-legged as well as four) you will know. If they are not, begin a rehabilitation program beginning with small incremental exposures staying below threshold. The dog’s relationship and emotional well-being is critical and should be guarded with all of the love and care you can give.

Temperament is the genetic foundation for the puppy’s developing personality. It sets the stage for appropriate behavior and reactions to living in a world with humans and other animals. Add nutrition, medical care, environmental enrichment, training, handling, and grooming. Mix with a creative first 16 weeks including both intra-species and inter-species socialization and the result should be an emotionally sound puppy ready to take on the world.



Melissa McMath Hatfield, M.S., CBCC-KA, CDBC, earned a master’s in counseling psychology and is a retired licensed psychological examiner. Her mission is to enhance the human-dog relationship through understanding, knowledge and empathy. Currently she has a private behavior consulting practice where her main focus is performing temperament assessments and behavior evaluations of dogs who are exhibiting mental health issues. For further information please go to her website at <http://www.lovingdogs.net>.

Resources

Battaglia, Carmelo L. (n.d.) *Using Early Experiences, Nutrition and the Maternal Influence to Develop Puppies and Gain a Training Advantage: Success Depends on What You Know*. Retrieved from <https://breedingbetterdogs.com/article/maternal-influence>

Critical Periods in Puppy Development. (n.d.) Retrieved from <http://ice.ucdavis.edu/~robyn/Korina/BCIdeas/Criticalperiodsinpuppydevelopment.html>

Pfaffenberger, Clarence (1963) *The New Knowledge of Dog Behavior*. Dogwise Publishing.

Rugaas, Turgid (2015) *On Talking Terms with Dogs: Calming Signals*. Direct Book Service.

Segurson D’Arpino, Sheila (2007) *Behavioral Assessment in Animal Shelters*. Retrieved from <https://www.maddiesfund.org/behavioral-assessment-in-animal-shelters.htm>

Scott, John Paul and Fuller, John L. (1998) *Genetics and the Social Behavior of the Dog: The Classic Study*. University of Chicago Press.

Svartberg, Kenth and Forkman, Bjorn. (2002) “Personality Traits in the Domestic Dog (*Canis Familiaris*).” *Applied Animal Behavior Science*, 79.2, 133-155.

Volhard, Wendy (2005) *Volhard’s Puppy Aptitude Test*. Retrieved from <http://www.volhard.com/pages/pat.php>

Wolff, Caryl (2015, February 3.) The Importance of Puppy Socialization for Behaviorally Fit Dogs. Retrieved from <https://nadoi.org/the-importance-of-puppy-socialization-for-behaviorally-fit-dogs-caryl-wolff-copyright-2014/>