



## **Early Socialization – Position Statement by USA Veterinary Behaviorists!**

*Dr. Jennifer Messer, 2008*

For decades now, puppy trainers have been witness to the lifesaving positive impact of puppy classes. The bummer has always been that the veterinary community, albeit with good intentions, scared the bejebes out of dog trainers and guardians over the potential infectious disease risks of letting pups mingle with each other before they were fully vaccinated.

In the early days they recommended waiting until 6 months before enrolling a dog in school – probably in part because training norms back then bordered on the abusive, and pups were best kept away at any age, and in part because the vaccines for certain diseases, like parvovirus, were not terribly effective. With the advent of modern, dog-friendly training methods, and the increased popularity and accessibility of puppy classes, there was no longer the risk of pups being ruined by heavy-handed training. And with the development in the mid-90s of more effective vaccines against infectious disease, the risk of allowing otherwise healthy pups to mingle in a safe classroom setting, before the completion of their puppy vaccination series, was greatly reduced. However, despite these changes, the veterinary community has remained very wary of encouraging group class for pups early in their vaccine schedules for fear of infectious disease transmission.

A few lone veterinary crusaders did stick their necks out on the line over the past decade, arguing that the benefits of puppy class outweigh the risks so greatly that it is a travesty to discourage attendance. In North America it was Dr. R. K. Anderson, a board certified specialist in both preventive medicine AND in behavior, who led the way with an open letter to his colleagues. In this letter he urged fellow veterinarians to encourage puppy class for pups as young as 8 weeks old, after only their first vaccination, because the risk of infection is so much less than the risk of euthanasia due to behavior problems. The puppy class program that Dr. Anderson spearheaded at the University of Minnesota Veterinary College ran safely and successfully, as have other programs being run over the past decade that allow puppy attendance after a single vaccination, such as those at Purdue University, Ohio State University, your own Murdoch University Veterinary School, and likely many other institutions that I am unaware of.

It has been difficult for veterinarians to recommend classes for young pups when doing so carries some degree of risk – especially when the veterinary community as a whole had not come to any sort of collective agreement on whether the benefits outweigh the potential for harm. But the progressive realization that by keeping pups out of class until they are fully vaccinated we were winning the battle only to lose the war, has finally culminated in the superb groundbreaking position statement issued by the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior :

*“In general, puppies can start puppy socialization classes as early as 7-8 weeks of age. Puppies should receive a minimum of one set of vaccines at least 7 days prior to the first class and a first deworming. They should be kept up-to-date on vaccines throughout the class.”*

*“...the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior believes that it should be the standard of care for puppies to receive such socialization before they are fully vaccinated”*