



# Irish Pet Advertising Advisory Group

## The Breeder's Puppy Plan

### INTRODUCTION

#### Why Do We Need The Puppy Plan?

From the moment a litter of puppies is planned, both the breeder, and then later the new owner, want to do everything possible to make sure that each new puppy has the chance to grow up to realise his or her full potential. Thanks to the advances in health testing for both the puppy's parents and later themselves, coupled with responsible breeding, we can do much to make sure puppies are physically healthy and 'fit for function' – but for the vast majority of dogs, no matter what their start in life, this function will be that of a much-loved family dog.

Being a companion is the hardest job we ever ask a dog to do, as our expectations are so high. We want dogs to get on with everybody and everything – not to knock over the children or visitors, nor chase the cat, or bark at the postman (or anyone else). To go everywhere with us when we want but be happy to be left alone without complaint when we don't; to be accepting of loud noises, strangers, other dogs.... The list is endless. So what we need to give puppies in order to give them a good start in life is essential knowledge for any breeder, puppy rearer or new dog owner.

While many breeders understand the principles of raising puppies that are best placed to become excellent family or companion dogs, many are not getting it right. One of the major causes of death in dogs under two years old is euthanasia as a result of behaviour problems. Not only that, but many people find themselves with a dog whose behaviour is difficult to live with. Far too many dogs are ending up in rescue centres, and behaviourists and trainers up and down the country are seeing dogs with problems that could so easily have been prevented if the first 16 weeks of that dog's life had been properly managed and they had been prepared for the life they were going to lead.

Many breeders put a lot of time and effort into making sure their puppies are well socialised but others, while trying to do the very best for their puppies,

are not so aware of the importance of this vitally important time or know how to manage it. In addition, the public are, on the whole, not aware of how important socialisation is, and so do not realise the importance of going to a breeder who makes sure that their puppies get those vital early experiences in their first few weeks that are needed to make sure they are psychologically and therefore behaviourally fit for this function.

Until the puppy-buying public realises how vital this is, they will continue to buy puppies from dubious sources, fuelling the puppy farm business and putting money into the pockets of unscrupulous breeders.

The Puppy Plan is a step-by-step, simple but comprehensive, socialisation plan that starts with the breeder (or the puppy rearer, if different) who works through the first vital eight weeks. When the puppy goes to his new home, the Plan is then passed onto the new owner to continue.

### **The Science – why it matters**

The brain of a 16-week-old puppy has exactly the same number of brain cells as a newly born puppy – but it is roughly 10 times larger. This extraordinary increase in size has nothing to do with the brain cells themselves but the number of connections established between them. These connections are established as a direct result of all the experiences the puppy has in these first critical four months of life (and often much earlier).

Every single thing a puppy sees, hears, feels, smells and tastes, every meeting he has and every new thing he discovers produces literally trillions of new brain connections in those first 16 weeks, and they will last for life. He is learning what things are a part of his new life and his new family, what is safe and who is in his social group. While we can't hope to introduce every single thing a puppy will have to accept later in life, the more positive experiences guided by us he gets in this period, the more accepting he will be of novel things and situations. Not only that, but he will also be developing his learning skills, learning how to problem solve and deal with the inevitable frustrations of life, which in turn will help with his behaviour and training in the future.

A puppy who is properly reared in this period, will be far more likely to grow up to be confident, calm, learn new things more easily, be less likely to respond to new things fearfully or aggressively – and in short, is more likely to become a good family dog. In contrast, a dog who has not had this good start in life is more likely to be over-reactive, unable to concentrate, fearful, a slower learner, develop preventable behaviour problems – and in fact have a less well developed brain than his well socialised brother.

So why is this? All animals are, by instinct, scared of new things. It is this self-preservation instinct that will keep them safe from predators or other unsafe situations. For a newly-born animal to be fearful and cautious however is counter-productive, as everything is new to them and they would be constantly in a state of stress. So in most wild animals, this fearfulness starts at around three weeks old. What an animal hasn't met by then is regarded as

potentially dangerous and as such, they will avoid it, or if unable to do that, are likely to behave defensively.

In domestic dogs this sets in later, at about five to seven weeks old depending on the breed or type. What the puppy hasn't experienced by then, is far more likely to be perceived as potentially dangerous and for this reason, it is vital that breeders work hard to socialise and habituate their puppies long before they go to their new homes.

Up to the first 16 weeks of age, the puppy is also learning who is in his social group, who the people and animals are that form his family, who he is social and friendly to, who he plays with and who he is building a bond with. The new owner has to carry on this socialisation to teach the puppy about his new family and what his life with them is going to contain.

All cells within the body have a predetermined time to start and to stop developing, and at 16 weeks old (in some breeds and individuals much earlier), the window of opportunity for the majority of this brain development rapidly starts to close – and so do the puppy's learning opportunities. Puppies that have not had this socialisation and input in these valuable weeks, because of poor rearing practices or a lack of understanding of this process, will always be playing catch-up, and so much of their potential will never be realised.

Many, if not most, behaviour problems can be prevented through good socialisation and early education at this time – these include aggression, noise phobias, separation anxieties, over-reactivity, poor learning, fearfulness and much more. Waiting until a puppy goes to his new home, or is old enough to start training classes, means that this crucial period is missed.

The Puppy Plan has been developed to try and prevent behaviour problems, owners giving up on their dogs, and reduce the thousands of dogs who are handed over to rescue organisations, returned to breeders, or are euthanased for preventable behaviour problems.

The Puppy Plan aims to be completely inclusive – no matter where the puppy has been bred, whether pure bred or crossbreed, or the circumstances surrounding their birth. It aims to help every dog be the very best he can be, give new owners the confidence to know their puppy has had an excellent 'primary school education' and raise the standard of puppy socialisation throughout the country – and hopefully beyond.

For the breeders or rearers of puppies in their first eight weeks, the Puppy Plan follows an in-depth schedule, as their job is to give a broad-based early education – as they will not know where life will take the puppy and so they should be ready for anything.

Once the puppy goes to his new home, the Puppy Plan can be uniquely customised by the new owner to make sure their puppy fits into his new life and his new family.

## **Breeder or Puppy Rearer Introduction**

For the breeder, or whoever finds themselves caring for a litter of puppies in their first eight weeks, the aim of the Puppy Plan is to have a nationally-recognised socialisation programme that both provides a framework for socialisation and habituation, and also works as a diary that can be passed onto the new owner so that they can see their puppy's own development, perhaps with photographs or even short videos if you wish. This recorded programme of development allows new owners to feel more involved with their puppy, gives them a record of their puppy's socialisation, habituation and early lessons, and lets them see just how committed their chosen breeder is to ensuring the best future for their puppies and how much work goes into raising family dogs.

The new owners can be confident that their puppy has encountered the things that they may be expected to accept as part of their social group (socialisation) and also all the things they need to learn to accept and ignore – such as loud noises, cars, periods of separation etc (habituation). They will leave with a record of their puppy's early weeks, and they are able to carry on the Puppy Plan exactly where the breeder left off.

Potential new owners can also use the Puppy Plan to try and choose a puppy from a breeder whose home life is similar to their own (busy versus quiet household, city versus rural environment, with or without children, cats etc). By doing this, they are more likely to find a puppy who will fit into their new life easily, as they have already learned to be familiar with some of the challenges of their household.

It doesn't matter if you are a regular breeder, if you just have a one-off litter, or you are looking after a litter of puppies in a rescue centre - all dogs can follow the Puppy Plan. It is totally inclusive, and no matter your previous breeding experience, it is simple, not particularly time-consuming to complete, and enjoyable for both you and your litter.

For breeders, this means that your puppies are more likely to be successful in their new homes, are less likely to have problems in their new lives, and are less likely to be returned to you or end up in rehoming centres. The Puppy Plan is also consistent with the requirements of Kennel Club's Assured Breeder Scheme – which will give owners even more confidence in both the physical and mental health of your puppies, and their fitness as perfect family dogs.

For many breeders it is what they do already – and for those breeders the Puppy Plan gives a formal way for others to recognise all the work they do to produce the very best puppies they can. For new, or one-off, breeders, the Puppy Plan will provide a framework for socialisation, habituation and early learning.

For rescue and rehoming centres, it is also vitally important that puppies get an education in these early weeks as the bad start they have had often leaves

them ill-prepared for life as a family dog, and perhaps even destined to come back into rescue.

As you work through the plan try to record this process with photos (and/or videos) and diary entries, which you can pass onto the new owner when the puppy goes to his new home for them to continue the work you have started. This gives the new owner a record of socialisation which will in turn add value to your puppies – in the same way that health certificates give the owner a proven record of health testing.



Irish Pet Advertising  
Advisory Group

A step forward for the safe  
advertising of pets online



[www.ipaag.ie](http://www.ipaag.ie)

## **THE FIRST EIGHT WEEKS**

### **The Puppy Plan**

**The First 8 Weeks – ‘Primary School’ training given by the breeder/  
puppy rearer**

### **Personalise your Puppy Plan**

Name:

DOB:

Breed/s or type:

Breeder or rescue centre name:

First photo and/or video:

Mother’s name:

Mother’s photo and/or video:

Father’s name:

Father’s photo and/or video:

Any other info (copy of pedigree, photos of siblings etc).

### **The Puppy Plan**

Each week of the diary breaks down into two sections. The first explains the development of the puppies at this stage (and so the science behind it), and the second outlines the tasks to do in each week.

### **Pre-birth information – Look after the mother**

#### **The Science**

The Puppy Plan starts from before the puppy is born. For anyone planning to breed a litter of puppies, they need to make sure that the mother is healthy and happy and is kept in warm, stress-free conditions. Most importantly, they should ensure that the mother has a good temperament - as this will be passed onto her puppies (in the same way that if she is nervous, worried or fearful, this will also be passed on).

Puppies born to mothers suffering from poor nutrition, extremes of temperature, and mental or physical stress, are more likely to show behavioural and emotional problems.

Research has also shown that if the mother is stroked, handled and given the care and attention she needs during her pregnancy, the puppies will be more likely to be docile, more emotionally stable, and be born with more enjoyment of being handled.

In addition, if the mother has a good relationship with her owners and feels relaxed and secure, she is going to be happy for her puppies to be handled by them (which is vital for the Plan as well as the puppies' development), and will pass on that positive attitude to her puppies – which is vitally important.

This highlights the importance of obtaining puppies from breeders or owners who look on their dogs as their companions and friends – and not just dogs (or even worse, units of commercial enterprise) In other words, it underlines to new owners the importance of finding a good breeder – and not buying their puppy from internet adverts, pet shops or puppy farmers.

### **Task**

Make sure mum gets all the care and attention she needs.

### **Weeks 1 & 2**

This should be a quiet time for both the mother and the puppies, as this is the time when the maternal bond is established. At this time, you should be gently handling the puppies to check on good progress, and generally ensuring the mother and puppies are doing well. Any causes for concern should be discussed with your vet.

### **Week 3 – Hello world**

This is the first week of socialisation and habituation and is a really important week – and a busy one!

#### **The Science**

In week 3, the puppy's eyes start to open and, while his vision is initially poor, he can see movement (although may not notice stationary objects). He also starts to hear what is going on around him. This is the time to start to introduce the sights and sounds of family life – anything he sees or hears now will be accepted as normal.

He will begin to startle when hearing unexpected sounds but, as his fear response is not fully developed, he will quickly return to normal. This is how he should learn to respond to non-threatening events as an adult rather than show the escalating fear that, for example, noise phobic dogs do.

In this week, the puppy is also starting to learn about his social group. He learns to recognise his mother and his littermates, and also to recognise humans as being part of his family too, and this is when he starts the bonding process. This is a good time to begin to introduce all other animals in the household (other fully vaccinated dogs and cats if you have them) and people (including children) who you will want the puppy to look on as part of his family group if they haven't been around already. This should initially be done quietly, allowing them only to wander around outside the puppy pen.

While all puppies and breeds develop differently and at different speeds, it is far better to introduce new things too early than too late. Perception develops

faster than reactions do, and so often they are learning long before we realise they are.

NOTE: Do not introduce small animals such as rabbits, guinea pigs, hamsters etc. You do not want to teach your dog that these are part of his social group and therefore show play behaviours towards them. While your eventually large dog may enjoy playing with your hamster, the hamster is certainly not going to enjoy it! Your puppy instead needs to learn to ignore these animals.

### **Suggested Tasks**

1. Make sure the puppy gets to hear as many sounds as possible. These should include: doorbells, TV, doors opening and closing, vacuum cleaners, music, bangs, clatters, conversation, and an introduction to fireworks and thunder. You can buy CDs with these noises on them or you can download them from the internet if you can't find them all. These shouldn't be playing all the time and do not need to be loud but should happen unexpectedly throughout the day at times when the puppies are awake. You are looking for the puppy to notice them and then quickly return to normal. For most people who rear the puppies in the house with the family, most of these noises will be nothing new but make sure the puppies get to hear the unexpected ones too such as fireworks and thunderstorms! These sounds need to start at a low level and can increase later in these weeks.
2. Provide lots of different things to look at. Roll things across their puppy pen, flash torches (not at the puppies but around the room), change the light levels. Bounce a large soft ball outside the pen. Roll or drag things past the outside of the puppy pen so the puppy gets used to movement he can't chase. Hang a baby's mobile above the pen for 30 minutes a day (out of reach). Some puppies will show very little reaction during this early period of life – but having these things around them will make a difference.
3. Handle, cuddle and pick up the puppies regularly, making sure they are being held in a comfortable, upright and natural position, and are being fully supported. They need to begin to bond to humans, and ensuring they are handled in an appropriate way will help this. The mother may be slowly starting to wean the puppies in the next couple of weeks, and when she does you can let them lick a dab of fish paste or pureed meat off the tip of a finger so they associate human hands with positive experiences. It is good for different people to do this (starting with any new people just sitting on the floor so the puppies can approach them in their own time).
4. Stroke the puppies gently with different textured things – woollen glove, a piece of sheepskin, a rubber glove, a very soft baby's toothbrush – as this will stimulate and develop their sense of touch.
5. Introduce different surfaces for the puppies to walk on (more of this in Week 4). Don't underestimate how much puppies learn through their feet!

6. Let other dogs (as long as they are calm, friendly and vaccinated) and cats (if you have them) wander around the outside of the pen. Some may have been doing this already.

## **Week 4 – Fun and Games**

### **The Science**

In Week 4 the puppy is starting to develop his play behaviour, and also, if given the chance, his problems-solving behaviour. It is also a good time for him to begin to learn how to deal with the inevitable frustrations in life.

In this week, the puppy needs some challenges – things to carry, pull, climb on, move around, tug with his littermates etc. This helps develop strength, coordination, agility – and sharing. Puppies deprived of this can grow up to be poor learners – or certainly slower than they would be otherwise. They also can grow up unable to deal with frustration – which can result in serious behaviour or temperament problems.

It is easy to get concerned if the mother now seems a bit rough at times – maybe walking off when they are trying to suckle, or growls at them or even stands on them but it is important that you are not over-protective, as this is also teaching the puppies how to cope with frustration and learn to overcome it.

This is also the week to start to spend more time with each puppy individually – slowly increasing the time they spend away from their littermates and their mother. This will help to prevent separation problems, will develop independence and will encourage bonding with humans.

Once again, some breeds or types may not have reached this stage yet, but it is important to provide these things so they can interact with them and learn from them, when they are ready.

### **Suggested Tasks**

1. Introduce more different surfaces into the puppy pen. Vet bed, crunched up newspaper, carpet (you can get off-cuts or samples from your local carpet shop), lino, rubber mat – anything and everything you can think of that is safe and will give the puppies lots of different tactile sensations.
2. Add things that the puppies can begin to experiment with - tug toys, Kongs, tunnels, upside down cardboard boxes with holes cut out, large pieces of sheepskin, handle-less bucket or basin on its side, bits of blanket tied at one end to the pen, a bundled up blanket that they have to clamber over... Anything that is safe – and always under your supervision.
3. Take each puppy out of the pen and spend progressively longer time with him away from his littermates – up to 10 minutes. During these times, go through the tasks for Week 3. Don't do them all every time – just one or two each time. Make sure the puppy has some relaxing time

too. Continue getting the puppies used to being handled – including ears, mouth, feet etc. Use tiny but tasty treats as soon as weaning begins, to ensure that he associates being handled with positive experiences.

4. Begin to teach each puppy to get used to being gently restrained. Kneel on the floor with him between your open legs with your hands linked in front of his chest. Hold him gently for 3 seconds and then let him go (as long as he is calm and not wriggling!). Build up very slowly to 30 seconds, with plenty of reward, so he gets used to dealing with the potential frustration of being restrained.
5. As much as possible, start to move the puppies as a litter around the house to different rooms with different noises, surfaces, activity levels (this should include the garden or patio if it is summer – but always under supervision to avoid any accidents).

## **Week 5 - 7 - Curiosity**

### **The Science**

These weeks are a crucial time for the puppy's brain development. This is when puppies are at their most curious and willing to approach people, but at the same time their natural fearfulness starts to be shaped by their environment. This increase of fearfulness is a gradual process over the next couple of weeks and so now is the time to introduce all manner of sights, sounds, and people – and also more interesting toys and experiences as this will ultimately determine how well balanced the puppy will turn out as an adult.

In some more reactive breeds, this fear response and hazard avoidance starts earlier and increases rapidly. For these breeds it is important that the tasks detailed below are worked on as early in this period as possible whereas the less reactive breeds have a later onset of hazard avoidance and so you can be a bit more relaxed about these tasks.

To give you a rough idea, the hazard avoidance in the wild wolf (who shares our dogs' ancestors) starts around 19 days old. In the average dog it starts around 49 days old. For the German Shepherd Dog (one of the more reactive breeds) it starts around 35 days old and in the Labrador (one of the least reactive) it can start as late as 72 days. These are all approximate as each individual dog will be different – but it gives you an idea of how hard you are going to have to work in these two weeks!

This is also the time to start to teach the puppy to be happy on his own away from his littermates, and to bond even more to humans.

### **Suggested Tasks**

1. Put more interactive toys into the puppy pen at times when you can supervise. These can include wobbly objects, tunnels, bits of cloth to climb over or burrow under, suspended tennis balls, larger balls that can be rolled about, empty plastic bottles with some pebbles in them that will roll noisily, small boxes that can be climbed on or in, trays filled

with stones or shallow water... Anything you can think of to introduce new stimuli to the puppies.

2. Once the puppies are eating solid foods happily, feed them from different bowls – plastic, metal, from your hand etc.
3. Over the next couple of weeks, try and make sure the puppy meets as many different types of people as possible – women, men, children, people with beards, hats, high heels, hoods etc – and that they have rewarding experiences to associate with them (games, treats etc).
4. Having heard all the usual household objects, it is time for him to experience them – this includes the TV, vacuum cleaners, ironing boards... anything that will form part of his life as a dog in a busy household. As always, make sure these experiences are positive. Start very slowly with these things not moving or switched on, and reward the puppy with a treat or a game for ignoring them not playing with them. Slowly you can begin to move them, switch them on at a distance etc – always going back a step if the puppy is reactive towards them.
5. On occasions, feed the puppy separately from his mum and littermates – and a little bit away from you (in a crate, behind a baby gate etc). Start to teach him that good things can happen when he is on his own. Also on occasions, feed him from your hand – he also needs to learn that having humans around his dinner is always a good thing.
6. Spend time with the puppy encouraging him to follow you, playing with him, making eye contact with him, stroking and handling him, picking him up and holding him – and generally getting him used to and enjoying human contact. Make sure all these interactions are positive for the puppy, using treats if necessary.
7. Try to take each puppy out individually to sit in the car, drive round the block, see and smell things that will be part of his daily life (traffic, trains etc). As he is unvaccinated (although will still have immunity passed to him from his mother) he should be carried but he should have all these experiences in these really important two weeks when his confidence is at its highest and his fear responses are at their lowest.

**IMPORTANT:** Always be very aware of the puppy and that he is having a good time. If he looks worried in any way, take it more slowly. Each puppy must be treated as an individual – and all this socialisation and habituation has to be fun and rewarding for him.

This is the time to start to teach the puppies to get used to wearing a light collar – only for a few minutes a day while they are thinking about other things, building it up over the next couple of weeks. Do not leave collars on when they are in a crate or play pen, or when unsupervised.

## **The 7 Week Checklist**

The puppy's early learning is nearly over – and it is time to check that you can tick as many as possible of the 7 Week boxes. These should have been done or experienced by the puppy on his own away from his mum and littermates.

While many of these things are never going to be part of a dog's new life, it does mean that he has experienced lots of different things and situations – this will mean he is less likely to be worried by unexpected situations or things that may happen in his new home as the unexpected is expected – or at least well-tolerated.

By the time he is seven weeks old he ideally should have:

1. Met 7 different types of people (examples: babies, toddlers, children, women, men, people with walking sticks, umbrellas, hats, wheelchairs....)
2. Been on 7 different surfaces (examples: newspaper, carpet, lino, concrete, grass, polished floors, vetbed, uneven ground...)
3. Played with 7 different types of toys (plush, hard, tuggy etc)
4. Heard 7 different household/natural noises (for example TV, radio, vacuum cleaner, playing children, different traffic sounds, thunder, fireworks, things been dropped, cooking timers....)
5. Been in 7 different locations – and ideally eaten in 7 different locations (different rooms (or even different parts of the room), outside on concrete, on grass, hand fed, in a car, with others, on own etc)
6. Done 7 different problem solving activities (for example climb over a step, over a blanket, go through a tunnel, get a toy from under something....)
7. Ideally been out and about to see 7 different places or things (carried to watch traffic, children in playground, vets, sat in car etc).

Mark in the Puppy Plan which of these have been done and where possible include photos (photos are the only proof the new owners has and this should be 'best practice') of these in the Puppy Plan so the new owner has a proven record of all the work that has been done with their puppy.

## **Week 8 – Starting a new life**

For most puppies, week eight will be their last week before going off to their new life – as this is when most breeders send their puppies off to their new homes. They have learnt all about how to be a dog from their mother and littermates, they have had an excellent education from you, the breeder or puppy rearer, and now it is time for them to learn how to be a family dog in their new home.

This period however generally coincides with an increase of fear in puppies – most puppies will begin to start to show fear to things that they haven't been

introduced to up until this point (although some of the more reactive breeds or types of puppies may have started this significantly earlier). This increase in fear to new things is the reason why you have been working so hard in the past few weeks to make sure as many things as possible are now accepted by the puppy as 'just being part of life'. From now on, anything new will be regarded with much more suspicion/fearfulness. One important window of opportunity for development is starting to close.

This is a week to go over all the things the puppy has been doing/ has met in the past seven weeks – but not a week to introduce new things.

This is also the time to get your Puppy Plan ready to hand over to the new owner so they can see how much you have done, and continue where you left off. It is time to say goodbye to him and send him off to his new life, knowing that you have done everything possible to ensure he has a fantastic future ahead of him.

If you plan to keep all or some of the puppies beyond this time, make sure you continue with the next section of the Puppy Plan, working each puppy individually.

For more information, please visit [www.ipaag.com](http://www.ipaag.com)