

Assistance Dog Puppy Behaviour: The Influences of Puppy Training and Socialisation Provided by Puppy Raisers, and Organisational Support

Dac Loc Mai¹, Tiffani Howell¹, Pree Benton², Pauleen Bennett¹

¹La Trobe University, Flora Hill, Victoria, Australia. ²Centre for Service and Therapy Dogs Australia, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia

Introduction: Although puppies are carefully selected into a puppy raising program as future assistance dog candidates, many do not proceed to advanced training after leaving their raiser, for behavioural reasons. Puppies' early experiences help determine their adult behaviour, but the raiser's role in puppy behavioural development during the first year of the puppy's life, is unclear. This study investigated relationships between puppy behaviour and several raising factors, including raisers' training and socialisation practices, and organisational supports.

Methodology: A sample of 231 raisers (205 women), completed an online survey, which included demographic information and three self-reported questionnaires measuring: raisers' socialisation, training, and help-seeking practices; support factors (e.g., trainers, mentors); and puppy behaviour. Stepwise linear regression analyses determined which raiser practices and support factors best predicted puppy behaviour. Additionally, mediation analyses were conducted to further explore any relationships between organisational supports and raiser's practices.

Main Results: An increase in puppy trainability was predicted by higher puppy age, and raisers' socialisation and training practices, $F(3,126) = 17.52, p < 0.001$. Reduced puppy distractibility was predicted by higher puppy age, and raisers' training practice, $F(2,127) = 15.11, p < 0.001$. Puppy excitability reduced as a function of higher raisers' socialisation practice, and support from puppy sitters from the organisation and external trainers, $F(3,126) = 7.39, p < 0.001$. Raisers' socialisation practice was the only variable that, when increased, predicted lower puppy general anxiety, $F(1,128) = 7.83, p = 0.006$, and higher adaptability, $F(1,128) = 6.81, p = 0.01$. Meanwhile, raisers' help-seeking behaviour mediated the relationships between mentor/counsellor support and raisers' socialisation, and training practices.

Conclusions and Implications: Raisers' practices directly influenced puppy behaviours. Therefore, organisational supports and training should aim to improve raisers' practices. Promoting a help-seeking culture and providing supervised peer-learning activities amongst raisers is crucial.