

The Plastic Puppy: Breaking the Puppy Mill Cycle with Touch and Patience
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Statement of Problem:

Puppies who grow up in a puppy mill environment and are removed from their mother and pack mates too early can develop a host of behavioral and health problems. Can these puppies and young dogs be adapted to normal life with the help of obedience training and canine massage? How long does neural plasticity last for dogs?

Limitations of Study

There is little to no research studies about the following:

- Effects of removing puppies from their mother and pack members before the age of the optimum time of 8-12 weeks
- How effective obedience training is when used without previous socialized puppies?
- How can a remedial socialization program be developed that works for most puppies?
- What can pet parents expect to accomplish by using touch techniques to create new behaviors?

Research Methodology

Since this is a unmined area, I will present my experiences in rescuing a mill dog. Information on resources will appear as a bibliography and a list of useful links.

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How many of us know that most puppies purchased in pet stores or online are the result of a puppy mill environment?

In the United States alone, there are over 10,000 puppy mills which produce an annual 4 million puppies. Sadly, the amount of dogs that are destroyed because of overpopulation is also around 4 million.

Puppy mills exist for only one reason: to produce as many viable puppies as possible for sale. A breeder often does not consider the health or comfort of the puppy producing females, starting them into the breeding cycle as early as 6 months old and breeding them every cycle (2 times a year) until they are worn out or too sick to produce any more puppies. Crowded into small crates or wire pens, their food and water is often dirty and moldy. Feces and urine pile up in or under the crates, forcing the dogs to live in constant filth and leads to health problems. Prenatal care is minimal, if non-existent.

Worst of all, since most puppies will sell more quickly and easily when they are still very young and cute, puppy mill puppies are often removed from their mothers as early as 5-6 weeks. According to research, the ultimate age for a puppy going home is 7 weeks.

While those 7 days seem insignificant, in truth they are instrumental in the development of the puppy into a mature and healthy dog.

A puppy's brain reaches the final stages of development at 5-8 weeks. During this time, it is crucial that the puppy be held and cuddled, introduced to other animals and people, allowed to explore, and have many stimulating toys and things to do. Stressful situations should be avoided. In other words, the puppy needs a calm place to play and become socialized.

Remember that 6-month-old bitch that started having puppies as soon as she can, without this type of puppyhood? How well do you think she will do as a new mother? Would she be able to teach her puppies what they need to develop strong neural connections and confidence, leading to happy, healthy, and responsive dogs? Or is it more likely the puppies removed too early and under very stressful situations will become problem dogs when their socialization process is interrupted?

Boredom, lack of exercise and sunlight, and the exposure to barking and stressed dogs creates an environment that leads to repetitive spinning and other compulsive behaviors. Such an environment can create an anxious, tense, and depressed dog. Add all of this to being removed from their mothers early, and you can see that a puppy can start life with quite a handicap.

Behaviors and Health problems related to early removal of a puppy from his mother before 12 weeks include:

- Fear
- Reactivity (startles easily, etc.)
- Aggression
- Social impoverishment
- Potty training problems
- Intestinal and external parasites
- Lack of bite inhibition (learning when to bite, how hard to bite)
- Lack of tolerance to tactile contact, poor attachment skills

It all sounds like your new puppy could turn out to be quite the troublemaker. But, there's hope!

First, do your best to take your dog to as many different places as you can to make friends, both canine and human. Handle your puppy often and let others handle them, too.

Second, if you don't already have a well socialized dog in your home, find someone with a well-adjusted dog who will agree to spend time with you and your dog. Supervise the dogs as they get to know one another. The older dog may well take the pup under his wing and teach him the behavior the pup will need to learn how to be a dog.

Third, get your dog into a good obedience class as soon as possible. Time is of the essence to help your dog catch up in his development and to avoid any problems with

aggression. Make sure your trainer helps you teach your dog to love his crate and his time in it. It can literally save his life.

These three actions may very well prevent most problems for the new puppy. However, if the puppy is older than 8-12 weeks, you now have more than twice the work to give your puppy a healthy, stable outlook on life.

If you are starting with an older puppy, a rescued mill dog, or a rescued stray, there is still much you can do to help your dog learn new behavior. It will take patience and troubleshooting, but it will be worth it. Be patient and kind. Remember that your dog is acting on the information he has had in the past. It's up to you to help him discover how to behave appropriately.

Talk to your dog often. While he may not understand what you're saying, he recognizes your tone and body cues. Especially if your dog is timid and frightened, a soothing voice will help calm him.

Get down to her level and talk to her. Let her come to you. If she is reluctant to come to you, try offering a high value treat to her on the floor near you. Praise her for taking the treat, even if she is a few feet from you. You can bring her closer and closer, rewarding her with treats. At this point, don't try to touch her unless she initiates it. Don't insist that she stay if she decides it's too early to trust you. Take your time.

When your dog is feeling confident about how you treat him, try stroking his chest. Use the back of your hands and fingers to start, it's a less invasive touch. Especially if this is a small timid dog, DO NOT pet him on his head. (Think about how big and threatening your hand and fingers can look to a small dog face and eyes.) Instead, move slowly into the dog's space from the side, and stroke the chest under the collar. This is an excellent point for creating calmness. If you are concerned about the dog biting, try starting with the shoulder instead. Always be proactive, and be mindful of your surroundings, including any body language cues.

These are the basics. If your dog needs more, continue to work patiently with her while you do some reading and studying about dog behavior.

I suggest that you start with Linda Tellington-Jones' excellent book, [Getting in TTouch with Your Dog](#). It has clear and concise directions on how to best utilize her techniques, as well as suggested moves for various issues your dog may have. While this modality is touch based, it is not massage per se. It concentrates on the moving the skin touches with a "quarter and a half" circle. It is a light pressure touch, very soothing and calming.

I have been using TTouch with excellent results for the past 25+ years, including rehabilitating a 5-year-old Papillon. Allie started her life with us after being rescued from either a puppy mill or a hoarding situation. She rarely blinked the first few weeks she came to us; and holding her was like handling a bundle of sticks wrapped in dried leather. I could not work with her at all unless I wrapped her in a tea towel first, so I didn't touch

her fur. She didn't play, she didn't bark, she would not eat or drink in front of me or the other dogs for her first year. Her favorite hiding place was usually the smallest spot she could find to squeeze herself into. I started working with her, first for about 5 minutes. Over time, I added more time and number of sessions into her schedule.

As a student of anatomy, I was always learning new things about how our bodies worked. I read an article on how scientists found a link from the vagus nerve to the vestibular nerve. Turns out that stimulating one influences the other, leading to calming (vagus) and balancing (vestibular) the mind and body. When I first read the article, I thought, "That might work for Allie." Especially since Allie had come to us with a severe ear infection and a growth in her ear canal (successfully removed), I was curious as to how this information could help her heal. I'd already been rocking her, so I thought I'd keep on with it and watch what happened. Allie and I established a routine. Every evening, I would take her into the living room, wrap her in a soft quilt, and rock her. For 30 to 45 minutes, she would snuggle in my arms. At first, she just drowsed until she wanted to get up. But slowly, she began to relax and make eye contact, even decided she could let me pet her on her fur under her blanket.

But the day she fell so deeply asleep in my arms that she snored, mouth gaping, I knew we had stumbled onto an effective way of assisting Allie.

Other benefits were noticed: no more reverse sneezing, brighter eyes, stronger confidence and curiosity, and generally a more relaxed condition.

While this experiment is more in the realm of anecdotal information, not scientific fact, I feel confident from my experiences that touch--regular, gentle, and loving touch--offers to lay people an effective way to improve their animals' behavior and lives. It's non-invasive, inexpensive, easy to do, and it brings pleasure to both the person and the animal. Because of this experience with Allie and other experience with other dogs, I became aware that like humans, the brains of dog and other animals showed signs of neural plasticity. While I don't profess to be a neuroscientist, I do believe in the ability to create new neural paths that can change how people and animals think and behave. I'm hoping that there are researchers out there studying this, and that one day we will know how to help both people and animals change their lives for the better.

Bibliography

I encourage you to read Temple Grandin's book, Animals in Translation. I got lucky and read this book before Allie came into my life. It was the best training I could of have for helping her and other rescued dogs. From Ms. Grandin's work, I was able to learn how to decode what Allie reacted to and come up with a viable solution to help her. This has become one of my best tools for helping dogs lead more happy and confident lives. I also highly recommend any other of Ms. Grandin's books, especially her Animals Make Us Human.

Getting in TTouch with your Dog by Linda Tellington-Jones

The Tellington Touch, Caring for Animals with Heart and Hands. Linda Tellington-Jones with Sybil Taylor published by Penguin Books. 1992.