

Puppy Preschools in the Adelaide Area

Contact: Dr Susan Hazel

Phone: 8303 7828

email: susan.hazel@adelaide.edu.au

Room GO4, Davies Building, Roseworthy Campus

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Background and Aims:

A puppy socialisation and training program, or Puppy Preschool, aims to both socialise puppies during an important developmental stage of their life, and also enhance their basic training. The end result should be a dog that makes a better pet, thus enhancing the bond between the dog and human owner/s. This in turn may reduce the thousands of dogs relinquished at animal shelters each year.

There has been only one peer-reviewed study of the effects of a puppy socialisation and training program on puppy behaviour. Seksel et al. (1999) showed that puppy socialisation programs could enhance the response of the puppies to commands, but no significant effects were seen on the responses to various social stimuli. Despite the lack of evidence for their efficacy, Puppy Preschools are prevalent in Australia. This study will collect basic demographic data on Puppy Preschools in the Adelaide area, along with data on dog behaviour from owner questionnaires and a measure of the attachment between the primary caregiver and the dog. The hypotheses to be tested are:

- Puppy Preschools in Adelaide will vary widely in their demographic factors, including experience and qualifications of people running the program, class size, and material given during the class.
- Factors relating to the Puppy Preschools (such as class size) will be associated with the incidence of behavioural problems in the puppies/dogs.
- Factors relating to the Puppy Preschools (such as class size) will be associated with the attachment between the primary caregiver and the puppy/dog.

It is hoped that the results of the study will enable evidence-based guidelines to be written for best practice in running a Puppy Preschool.

Research Plan

1. Determine the location of the Puppy Pre-Schools in the Adelaide metropolitan area
2. For each puppy pre-school a survey will be used to determine factors such as qualifications of staff, number of dogs in each class, and socialisation methods.
3. Conduct Pre- and Post Puppy Pre-school survey of puppy owners, with questions including demographic data on the dog, and any behavioural problems of the puppy.
4. Conduct a survey of dogs (1-3 years of age) at veterinary surgeries around Adelaide, with questions including whether or not the dog attended a Puppy Preschool, training and any behavioural problems. An Attachment Questionnaire will also be used to assess the attachment between the dog and owner (Winefield et al. 2008).

References

Seksel K, Mazurski EJ, Taylor A (1999) Puppy socialisation programs: short and long term behavioural effects. *Applied Animal Behaviour Science* 62:335-349

Winefield HR, Black A, Chur-Hansen A (2008) Health effects of ownership of and attachment to companion animals in an older population. *International Journal of Behavioural Medicine* 15:303-310