

Raising an emotionally healthy puppy

Puppies are more than just pets—they become cherished members of our families. As they grow, we ask a lot of them: to adapt to our ever-changing, human-centered world and fit into our busy daily lives. From the moment a puppy enters your home, you take on an important responsibility: supporting their development not only physically, but emotionally too. Being truly happy means both a healthy body and mind.

Just like people, every puppy is unique. Their genetics—including their mother's physical and mental health during pregnancy—and early life experiences shape how they see the world. These things affect how easily your puppy gets used to new people, places, and situations.

The first 16 weeks (4 months) of your puppy's life are especially important. This is an important time for your puppy to learn and grow. To help your puppy become a happy, confident adult dog, they need a safe place and lots of good experiences. These help their brain grow strong and can stop problems later, like fear and anxiety.

With your patience, guidance, and support during these early months, your puppy will have the best chance to thrive as a confident and happy adult dog.

Emotionally Healthy Puppy



Learning

Making good decisions/developing patience/problem solving



Predictability

Daily routines/social interactions



Secure Relationships

Access to care givers/developing independence



Safety

Meeting biological & emotional needs

Providing an Optimal Physical Environment

When introducing your puppy to a new home, they'll have the chance to explore many new things and gradually interact with unfamiliar people. To help your puppy feel safe and secure, it's important to give them the choice to access a special space where they can rest or play without being disturbed. This is known as a "safe space."

The image to the right shows one example of how a safe space can be set up in your home.

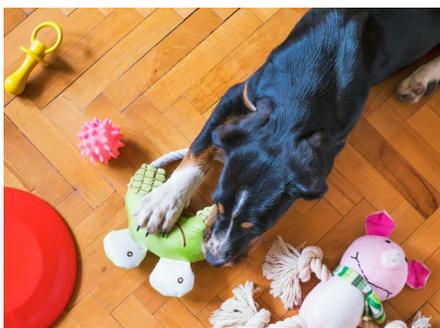


An ideal safe space includes:

- **Essential resources** that are important to your puppy, such as comfortable resting areas, hiding spots, toileting areas, and water stations.
- **Opportunities to express natural behaviours** like licking, chewing, shredding, and sniffing. These activities help your puppy regulate their emotions, especially when they feel overwhelmed.
- **A break from handling and social interaction** with people or other household dogs while in this space.

Examples of suitable items to encourage chewing, licking, sniffing and shredding are available in the pictures provided.

- **Licking** – e.g. KONG toys filled with cream cheese or puppy mousse.
- **Snuffle mats** – scatter puppy treats or kibble to encourage your puppy to use their nose and explore.
- **Lick mats** – spread with peanut butter to offer a calming sensory experience.
- **Newspaper** – or similar materials allows your puppy to engage in natural shredding behaviours. It might get a little messy, but it's so much fun for your puppy. It can also stop them from chewing items you don't want them to.
- **Quiet area with access to a puppy chew** - Ensure your puppy has access to a quiet, comfortable space where they can rest without being bothered. Including a safe chew item in this area helps your puppy calm down and gives your puppy a positive way to self-soothe.



Chew toys



Newspaper



Chew toys

Finding Comfort and Support Through Chewing and Licking

Puppies use their mouths to explore and learn about their new world. Chewing also releases ‘feel-good’ endorphins, which helps puppies relax and feel calmer.

Chewing and licking is a form of self-soothing that can help puppies deal with frustration, boredom or feeling overwhelmed.



Respecting Your Puppy's Safe Space

It's your responsibility to protect your puppy's safe space. Everyone who comes to your home, including your kids and visitors, should be advised not to approach your puppy while they are in this space. Instead, encourage everyone to sit quietly nearby—on the floor or a chair outside the safe space—and allow your puppy to choose whether to approach and interact. This respectful method is known as a ‘choice-based’ or ‘consent-based’ approach. It gives your puppy the chance to choose what it wants to do and this makes them feel safer and calmer.

Supporting Your Puppy's Comfort and Safety at Home

As your puppy grows, it's important to ensure they only access areas and items that are at a safe and comfortable height. Their bones and joints are still developing, so minimizing strain is key to supporting healthy growth.

To help your puppy rest and retreat safely:

- Provide low platforms or bedding options that are easy to access.
- Safe examples include low lounges, stacked blankets, or children's foam gym mats.

Avoid encouraging your puppy to jump onto high surfaces such as adult-sized beds or couches. Any access to elevated areas should be:

- Supervised at all times.
- Limited to heights no greater than your puppy's shoulder level—this ensures they can comfortably and safely manage the movement.

By creating a low and secure environment, you're helping your puppy build confidence while protecting their developing body.

Providing Key Resources

All animals have a natural need to control access to resources that support their survival. You can help your puppy feel safe by making sure they always have access to the following:

- **Multiple key resources** - setting up more than one spot for water bowls, resting places, and toys throughout the home.
- **Feeding in a quiet area** where your puppy feels safe and won't be disturbed by people or other animals.
- **Avoiding removal of valued items.** Your puppy won't like you taking their favourite things away. Think about if someone took your phone away. How would you feel?
- **Multiple areas to support retreat and rest** - setting up multiple dog beds, bedding on the floor, low raised trampoline bed etc.

In Multi-Dog Homes:

- Keep puppies and other pets apart when giving them special things like treats, toys, or chews.
- Put food, water, toys, and beds in different places around your home so pets don't fight over them.
- If your puppy seems stressed or upset, give them more of the things they like.
- Make sure your puppy has space to walk away from other pets – avoid tight spaces or narrow walkways.
- Find out what your puppy loves most (like a favourite toy or treat) and only give it to them when they're alone, so they feel safe.

Recognising Signs of Resource-Related Stress

Watch how your puppy acts around food and toys.

- They might move closer or away to protect important things, like their food bowl or toys.
- If they feel threatened, they might crouch down, growl, show their teeth, or even snap to keep others away.
- If things get worse, they might bite, pin another animal down, or lunge.



What to do, when to seek advice

What to Look For	What to Do	When to Seek Advice
<p>Fighting over things like food, toys, or beds e.g. pinning down, biting, growling.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Ensure multiple resources are available (toys, water stations, rest places). → Manage puppies around high-value items (chews, treats, toys) by allowing them to enjoy these items undisturbed in their safe space or when they are alone. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Biting that causes punctures to the skin. → Interactions cannot be interrupted. → Continued escalation despite added resources. → Poor recovery after conflict.
<p>Feeling worried around food e.g. They might move closer or away to protect important things, like their food bowl or toys, lowered posture, growling, lip lifting, guarding behaviour, getting closer to their favourite thing when someone or another animal comes near.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Always feed puppies separately. → Feed in a quiet area where the puppy feels safe. → Add more valued resources if signs of stress/conflict appear. → Never directly remove valued items from the puppy. Swap them for something even better! 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Intense snarling or rushing at the caregiver. → Biting causing punctures. → Showing behaviours to keep access to things they find important, like food, toys, or furniture.
<p>Finding it hard to let go of things like toys or food without getting upset</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Provide space between resources. → Allow puppies to move freely around furniture (avoid narrow walkways). → Offer appropriate height platforms for support and retreat. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Some puppies find it hard to calm down after a disagreement. They may keep trying to solve problems by standing their ground or reacting strongly. They might not walk away or take a break when things get tense. After a conflict, they can take longer to feel calm again.
<p>Finding it hard to move away or get some space from others</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Observe interactions during play and resource use. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → If a puppy cannot move away or disengage from a potential threat (other dogs/puppies).
<p>High-value items that are meaningful to your puppy</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Provide high-value items only during alone time. → Ensure access to multiple valued items (e.g. rest areas, water stations). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Growling, snapping, or snarling when approached with high-value items.

Need Support?

If you have ongoing concerns about your puppy's behaviour, support is available:

- **Contact the RSPCA NSW Sydney Veterinary Hospital** at (02) 9770 7575
- **Email our Behaviour Helpline:** mail@rspcansw.org.au

Creating Predictability

Puppies feel safer when things are predictable.

If your puppy doesn't know when they'll eat, sleep, play, or go to the toilet, they can feel worried or stressed.

To help your puppy feel calm and happy, try to do these things at the same time each day – especially when they're new to your home.

A calm and predictable routine helps your puppy feel safe and helps avoid problems when they are older.

In Practice:

- Feed at the same time every day. Speak with your vet to determine a schedule that meets your puppy's physical growth needs.
- Ensure healthy sleep—puppies need 16 to 20 hours of sleep in a 24-hour period. Puppies need quiet, comfy places to sleep. Too much attention or noise can stop them from resting properly and make it harder for them to cope in your home. Good sleep helps puppies learn and stay calm.
- Take your puppy to their toilet spot after they eat or wake up from a nap.

Predictable Interactions Matter

Treat your puppy in a kind and predictable way. Let your puppy choose when to come to you, and give them space to walk away if they want to. This helps your puppy feel safe, builds trust, and makes your bond stronger.

Helpful Resources:

- [How to Approach a Dog Video](#)
- [What Not to Do When Approaching a Dog Video](#)

Where to Pet Your Dog



1 The Head

The majority of dogs do not like us touching the top of their head.

2 The Back

This is a nice place to have 'scratches' and 'strokes'. Always move your hand away after a short time to see if the dog still wants you to continue.

3 The Tail

The majority of dogs do not like us touching their tails.

4 The Tummy

This is for family only. If you are unfamiliar to the dog, we do not advise you touch the dog's tummy.

5 The Legs and Paws

A lot of dogs do not like you touching their legs or paws

6 The Chin and Chest

This is a nice place to have 'gentle strokes'. Always move your hand away after a short time to see if the dog still wants you to continue.

Building a Secure Relationship with Your Puppy

A strong, secure bond begins with being **present and available**, especially in the early stages after bringing your puppy home. Let them come to you when they feel unsure or scared when they see new things, hear new sounds or visit new environments. This helps them feel safe, builds trust, and gives them confidence in new places.

Understanding Your Puppy's Communication and Emotional Needs

If your puppy seems worried about new experiences or shows signs of fear when approached, it's important to pause and give them the **option to move away**. Letting them have space helps them feel safe and more open to being around others in the future.

Fear and Anxiety in Puppies and Dogs Can Look Like: [Video](#)

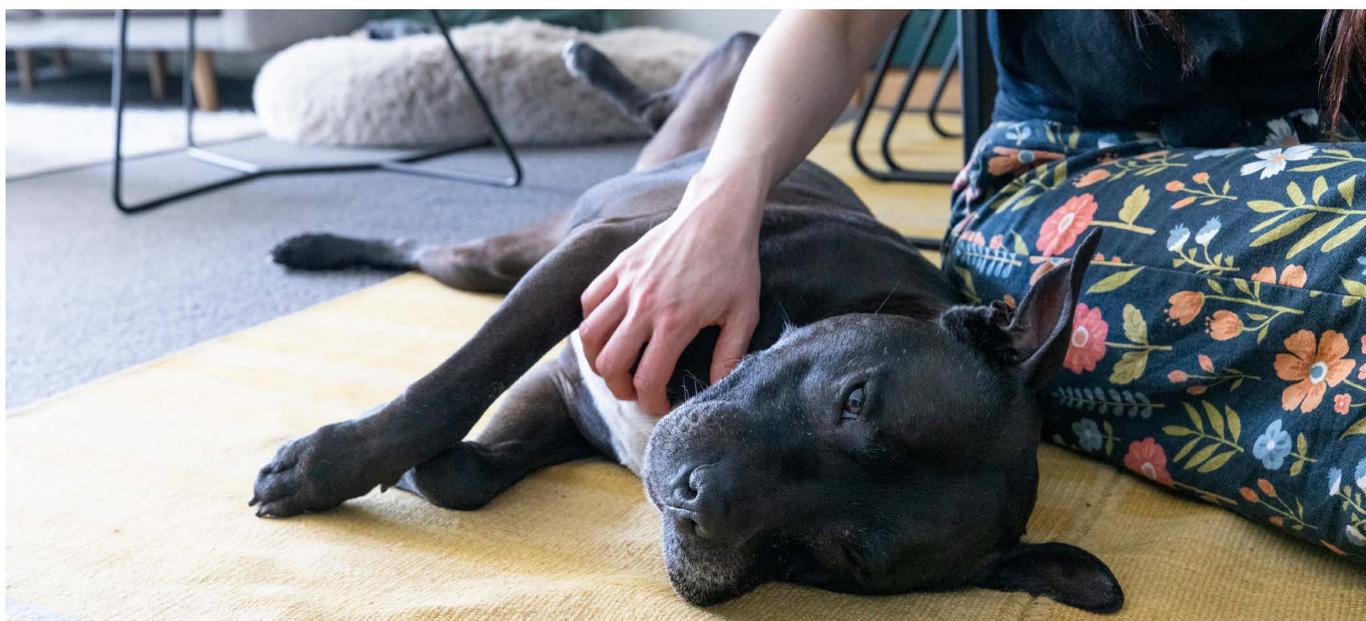
- Ears pulled back
- Lip licking
- Rapid blinking
- Tense facial expression
- Panting (when not hot)
- Avoiding eye contact
- Cowering or lowered body posture
- Tail tucked
- Yawning (when not tired)

Recognising and respecting these signals helps your puppy feel safe and supported.

Supporting Your Puppy Through Fear and Anxiety

If your puppy shows signs of fear or anxiety—whether around you or during social interactions with people or other animals—allow them the **choice** to approach the person, animal or object, or retreat to their **Safe Space**. Avoid approaching, petting, or picking them up **if they prefer to move away**.

It's natural to want to comfort your puppy when they're scared, but forcing them to interact can make them avoid people later—especially if it didn't feel safe or was too much for them.



Giving/receiving information

Puppies use smell to understand the world. They sniff and lick to learn, and sometimes pee or show certain body parts to share how they feel—especially if they're uncomfortable.

You can support your puppy by:

- Removing your attention and giving them space.
- Allowing them to approach you when they feel ready.
- Recognising that not all interactions mean they want to be touched or handled.

Letting your puppy sniff and explore slowly helps them feel safe and understand their surroundings.

Patience Over Punishment

Puppies keep learning for their first two years. Like teenagers, they can sometimes act in ways that are tricky or hard to manage.

- **Punishment** (e.g. yelling, physical corrections, or using time-out) can have **long-lasting negative effects** on your puppy's emotional wellbeing.
- Instead, focus on **encouraging and rewarding desirable behaviours** at every opportunity.
- Be patient—your puppy is learning how to navigate the world.

Laying the Foundation Before New Experiences

We recommend focusing on building a strong, trusting relationship before introducing your puppy to new environments or experiences. Always follow your vet's advice regarding vaccination schedules before socialising your puppy outside the home.



Learning Opportunities

Just like us, puppies experience both pleasant and unpleasant emotions—and all of these play a vital role in their learning and development. While unpleasant emotions like fear may feel uncomfortable, they are essential for survival. For example, if something is frightening and potentially harmful, the fear response helps the puppy learn to avoid it in the future.

From a puppy's perspective, every experience is associated with either a positive or negative outcome. These associations shape how they respond to similar situations later in life.

Puppies can struggle with big feelings, especially if they didn't get the best start in life. This can make stress harder to handle as they grow. It's important to notice when your puppy is finding things tough and give them comfort and support.

How You Can Help:

- Give your puppy the choice to remove themselves from situations they find overwhelming or uncertain.
- Allow them to explore controlled environments through sniffing and sensory activities. This helps them gather information and make decisions—such as whether to approach or retreat from something new.
- Avoid overexposure to intense or unfamiliar things, as this can lead to increased fear, anxiety, or frustration.
- Positive early experiences help your puppy feel brave and happy as they explore the world.

You're Not Alone

If you're facing challenges, support is available:

- Contact the **RSPCA facility** where you adopted your puppy to speak with a qualified behaviour consultant.
- Book a virtual consultation with our **Veterinary Behaviourist** at the RSPCA NSW Sydney Veterinary Hospital: **(02) 9770 7575**
- Or email our **Behaviour Helpline**: mail@rspcansw.org.au

