

# Socialising greyhounds for racing success



### Acknowledgements

We would also like to acknowledge Greyhound Racing NSW and their contributors Tracy Irons, Australian Veterinary Behaviour Services and Dr Kersti Seksel, Sydney Animal Behaviour Service who enabled us to use content from their booklet The Importance of Lifelong Socialisation and Habituation.

We would like to acknowledge University of Melbourne and the research undertaken by them on the Socialisation of Greyhounds to Optimise Their Racing Success and Maximise Successful Rehoming. We would particularly like to thank the industry participants who contributed to this research.

## Behaviour and racing success

The behaviour of the adult greyhound is affected by its early experiences with people, other dogs and animals, and a range of different environments.

A greyhound's ability to confidently cope and adapt to different situations as it prepares for, and undertakes, a racing career is key to racing success.

This booklet provides you with information on how to expose your greyhound to positive experiences through **socialisation** and **habituation** at every stage of its life.

### Socialisation in the racing context

Socialisation usually refers to the positive relationship between dogs and humans, but can also be used to describe the relationship between a dog and other dogs/other animals.

Another similar term is 'habituation', which is the process by which a greyhound learns when to respond to certain stimuli (objects, places, sounds, experiences) and when to ignore them. Habituation is most easily explained using a human example, such as a person who moves from the country to a city apartment. In the country, night-time noises are restricted to wind, rain and a few animal calls. In the city, the noise of people and traffic does not stop all night. At first the person has trouble sleeping, but after several weeks they slowly get used to the noise and sleeping becomes easier. This is called habituation, as over time the person's brain learns to filter out the night-time noises of the city so they can sleep.

Greyhounds can also habituate to different environmental stimuli. Habituation is easiest when they are young, and their brain is still developing. It is a vital learning mechanism for young greyhounds; providing them with the experience and ability to screen out unimportant stimuli. Habituation is key for a successful racing career.

For the purposes of this booklet, we are going to combine the concepts of socialisation and habituation, and term them '*socialisation for racing*'.

### Socialisation for racing

Socialisation for racing describes the process of building positive relationships between greyhounds and humans, other dogs and animals, and habituation to various environments.

#### **Socialisation with humans**

A racing greyhound encounters dozens of unfamiliar people, such as veterinarians, handlers, kennel hands, race officials and observers, during its life; particularly once it reaches the education, training and racing stages. If a greyhound is fearful of humans, it will struggle to cope with handling by multiple people and is unlikely to perform (race) to the best of its ability. It may also be very difficult to re-home at the end of its racing career.

#### **Socialisation with other greyhounds**

Interactions with the greyhound's mother and littermates early in life allow puppies to acquire normal social skills necessary for interacting with other greyhounds later in life. Generally, most greyhounds live and constantly interact with other greyhounds during their racing career, so these skills are usually maintained throughout life.

#### **Socialisation with other dogs**

Interactions with other dog breeds when a pup is young (from 12 weeks until 18 months and beyond) further reinforces sociability with other dogs and reduces predatory behaviour (prey drive) and aggression in the subsequent stages of life.

Greyhounds that have not had much exposure to other breeds of dogs from a young age can fail to recognise these breeds as a dog. When this happens, greyhounds can see other dogs, particularly small dogs, as a prey species.

Some people in the industry believe that greyhounds who are well socialised with other breeds of dogs (and in some cases humans) will lose their motivation to chase, but there is no scientific evidence to support this theory.

---

*Ensuring regular social interactions with other breeds of dogs from weaning through to adulthood is important for developing greyhounds with normal social skills.*

---



***Habituation to a greyhound's environment, including racing environments***

Exposure to a wide variety of environments regularly from a young age, particularly environments likely to be experienced in race settings, will minimise problem behaviours and produce a resilient and adaptable greyhound.

**A well socialised greyhound:**

- **will recognise other breeds of dogs, particularly small dogs, as a dog and not as prey;**
- **is calm and relaxed in a learning (rearing, education and training) environment, as well as in the race setting;**
- **will interact in positive way with other greyhounds and humans; and**
- **copers well in a variety of environments and situations.**

---

*Experience shows us that confident, bold greyhounds are more successful in a racing environment than shy, timid greyhounds.*

---

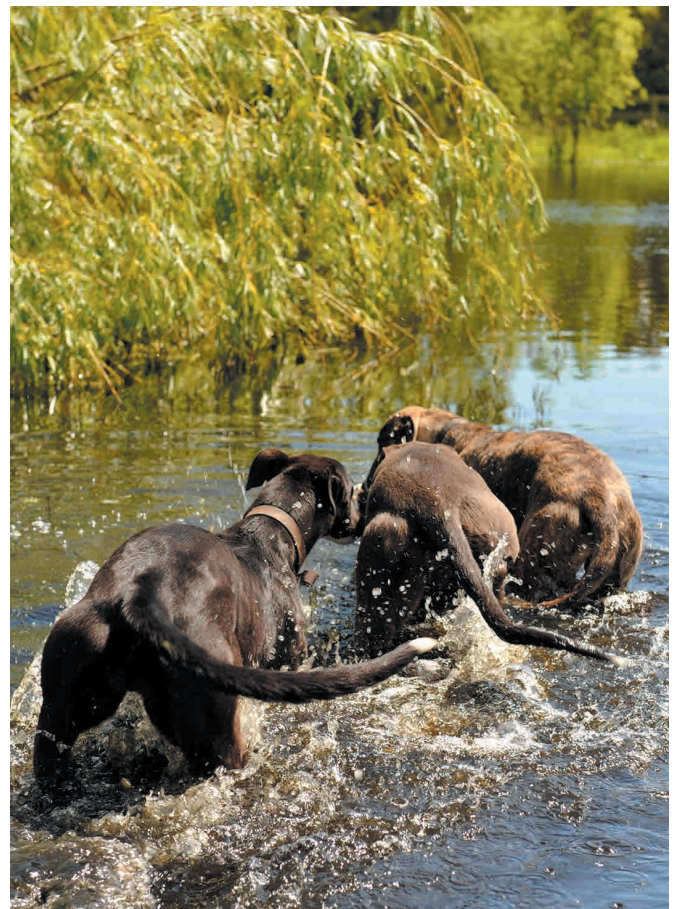
Many dog studies have tested this theory and have found a link between confidence, trainability and performance. Although genetics are important, most of the time, fear is learnt through experience. This is because the more a dog is familiar with, the less it has to be frightened of.

When an animal, including a greyhound, is fearful or anxious, the areas of the brain used for play (and chase) are inhibited or shut down. This means that **a fearful or anxious greyhound is less likely to be able to learn or perform to the best of its ability during a race and race performance.**

***Below is the beginnings of a list of things that your greyhound might encounter during their life:***

- other breeds of socialised and well-mannered dogs
- other animals (cats, livestock)
- many different people of different ages
- wearing a collar/coat/harness
- walking on a leash
- car travel
- crates and kennels
- indoor environments
- stairs, ramps, other uneven (safe) surfaces
- different surfaces – concrete, carpet, tarps, lino, tiles, rubber etc

You can clearly see that this list is already long, but by no means complete.



## How does socialisation work for racing success?

### The critical socialisation period

The development of well-adjusted behaviour in any dog (including greyhounds) is a result of genetics, the whelping environment, and the dam's experience in the last three weeks of pregnancy. Later experiences, particularly during the first few months of life, will influence behaviour and temperament.

It is the **developmental stage** from approximately 3 to 16 weeks of age (and sometimes even up to 20 weeks), called the **'critical socialisation period'**, that has been scientifically shown to be a period of time a puppy is most sensitive to learning.

- This is the time where puppies learn about what is 'normal' in their world. It allows them to be exposed to a wide variety of signs, sounds, smells and sensations without becoming fearful. After the critical socialisation period ends, puppies will be more suspicious and find it harder to adapt to new experiences. Positive exposure to many new experiences during the critical socialisation period help greyhounds become resilient and reduce fear and anxiety.
- This is also the time when a greyhound's early life experiences with people affects their attachment to humans. Regular positive interactions have been shown to reduce fear of humans later in life; whereas irregular or negative exposures to humans can result in fear responses to humans. This is sometimes lasting and irreversible.

The juvenile period between 16 weeks and 18 months of age also plays a major role in maintaining and further shaping the behavioural responses of adult greyhounds to humans.

---

*It is important for socialisation and habituation that exposure and experiences are positive, and that fear, anxiety, phobias or other signs of not coping do not develop.*

---



### So how do we do socialisation?

Teaching greyhound puppies to cope with people and other dogs (greyhounds and other breeds) in a positive manner, in a range of situations and environments, is what socialisation is about. This should continue from birth to adulthood with age appropriate activities and exposure.

The end goal is to produce a resilient and adaptable greyhound that:

- is attached to humans;
- can interact well with other dogs of all shapes and sizes; and
- can cope with all the types of stimuli they are exposed to in racing environments.

If your greyhound can do all this and is generally resilient, their chance of having a successful racing career to the maximum of the genetic potential is as secure as it can be.

### What is fear – why is it so important?

Fear is a survival instinct. It is hard wired into an animal as an automatic response to anything they perceive as threatening. Fear of specific things can also be learnt through experience. Fear helps protect an animal from harm, but where fear is misplaced it can also prevent an animal from interacting with or doing things that promote their survival or promote their welfare.

A good example is poor chase motivation in a greyhound at a racetrack, who shows strong chase motivation at home. Chase motivation has been shown to be linked with the parts of the brain that are involved in play, in other words chasing is a type of play behaviour, which is fun. Research has also shown that when an animal is fearful, the parts of the brain that are linked with playing are inhibited or shut down. So a greyhound who naturally loves to chase, may not be able to chase properly if they are fearful.

---

### *Fear also reduces learning ability.*

---

Most displays of aggression in dogs are the result of fear. A normally easy-going puppy may react fearfully to a new dog or person. This change often coincides with the end of the critical period of socialisation.

Between 4 and 5 months old, your greyhound may start to interpret anything unfamiliar as a threat and may either run away from or confront what frightens it.

For example, a young greyhound puppy that has never left the property it was born on, is sent for the first time to be educated on another property. It has only ever been handled by 2-3 specific people and has had a very fixed routine. The puppy has consistently lived with some or all of its litter mates and has never seen the inside of a kennel block, nor been exposed to other greyhounds from different litters or of different ages. This puppy has also never been transported before and its only interaction with humans outside of its primary carers has been with the veterinarian for vaccinations and microchipping; and for ear branding (all of which can be stressful events).

It is more than likely that the transition to education for this young greyhound is going to be confronting. The puppy may be fearful of strangers due to little experience with new people and environments, and its experiences with veterinarians and the ear brander. The overwhelming number of new stimuli and the fear associated with a complete change of environment are going to affect this young greyhound's ability to cope with its environment – in short, its' learning ability is going to be inhibited/reduced by fear.





### What is anxiety?

Anxiety is the anticipation of danger combined with signs of tension such as vigilance, increased movement or tense muscles.

### What is a phobia?

Phobias are exaggerated or overly strong fear responses. In dogs, phobias are generally associated with loud noises such as thunder. They involve sudden, all-or-nothing, abnormal responses that result in extremely fearful behaviours. Phobias may develop over time and may become stronger and more intense.

---

*Remember to always avoid using punishment for undesirable behaviours – use positive reinforcement and make interactions fun.*

---

As discussed earlier, **breeding, rearing and early education** are critical to ensuring a greyhound puppy is well socialised and able to cope in life. Breeders and rearers should make sure their puppies:

- experience **different environments** once they are vaccinated - starting with quiet environments and build up to more challenging ones as the pup remains confident;
- are exposed gradually to different **sounds** such as music, roller doors, people talking - many rearers and trainers keep a radio on in their kennels;
- have gentle, pleasant daily **handling** by as many different people as possible - activities such as playing with the feet, rubbing the muzzle, stroking their back and sides and looking in a puppy's ears; and
- are given regular, positive, **exposure to people** from very early in life to ensure they are properly socialised with humans.

Allow the puppies to encounter all of these between the ages of 3 weeks and 4-5 months (the critical socialisation period) and ensure your greyhound associates them with positive things, like food, attention or play. During this time, a puppy's brain is hard wired to be less fearful and eager to explore. It is important to keep socialising puppies after the critical socialisation period and throughout their lifetime, as socialisation behaviours will fade if they are not regularly reinforced.




---

*Introduce your puppy to new people very regularly, keeping the interactions pleasant and unthreatening. These interactions do not need to be long or entirely made up of active play. Puppies may need rest after these activities.*

---

Most people who are experienced with greyhounds know they are good-natured and lack aggression. However, poorly socialised dogs of any breed can be aggressive if placed in stressful situations (for example, a veterinary clinic or a crowded area after a long car trip). To prevent this, focus on **rewarding correct behaviour** and **preventing undesirable behaviour**. You will teach your puppies not to be fearful or anxious and will build a trusting relationship.

---

*Staff need to have good handling and interaction skills, and genuinely like greyhounds.*

---

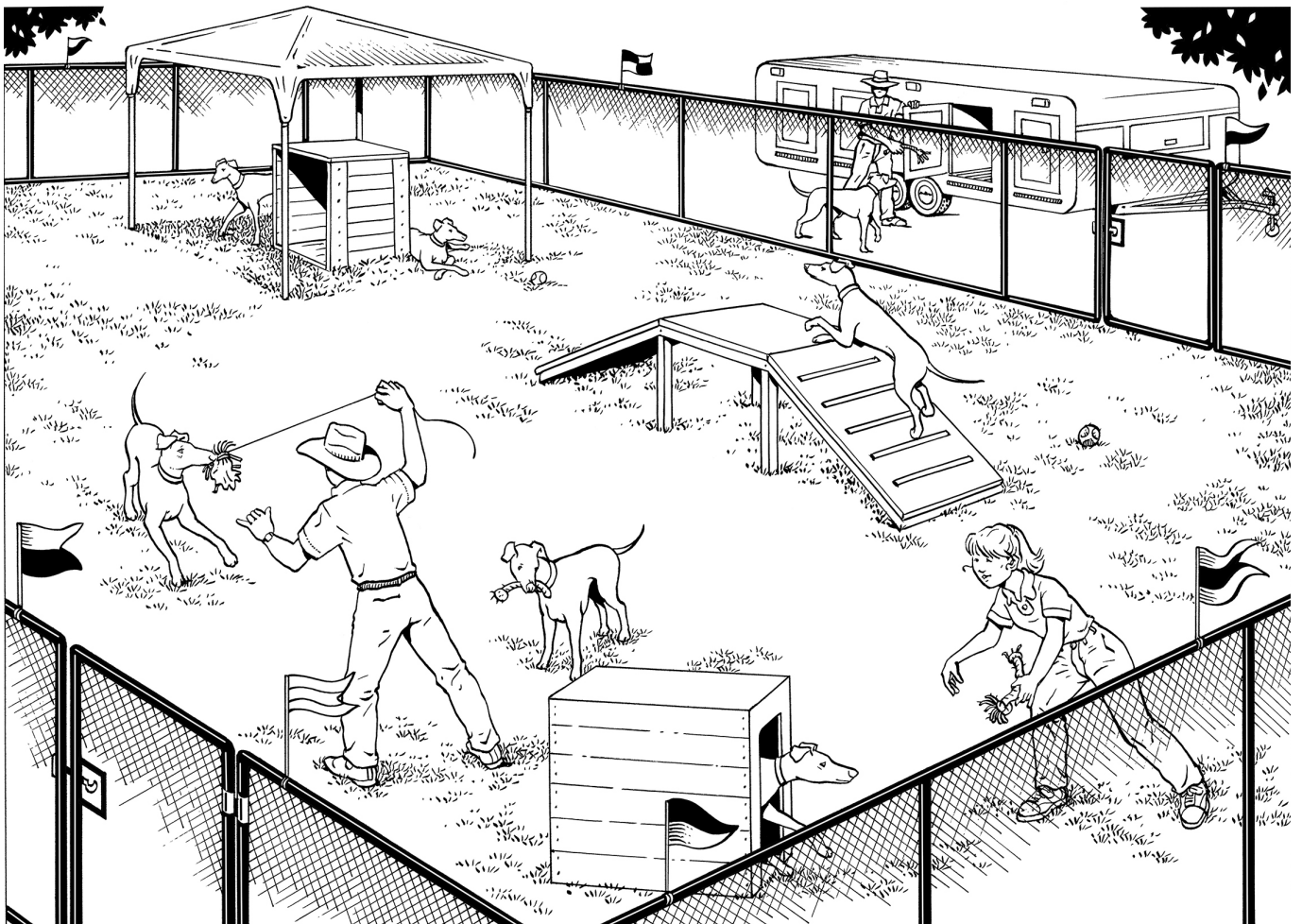
**Tips for successful socialisation**

- Observe your puppy closely to pick up any signs of fear or stress.
- As many experiences as possible must be positive (from your puppy's perspective) or at least some positive and some neutral. Experiences should be rewarding and fun for puppies.
- To create a positive experience, you can reward puppies with food treats, pats, praise and play; this is particularly important where an experience might be inherently negative (e.g. vaccination conducted by a stranger) and you need to ensure it is at least neutral, if not positive.
- It is important to continue your puppy's socialisation throughout its life; however, the first year of life has the most impact on how your greyhound will cope with new experiences for its lifetime.
- Avoid all types of punishment when socialising your puppy.
- Do not force your puppy into any situations that it is unsure of; you are best to allow it to approach new situations or objects at its own pace, but you can encourage it by using treats, play or some other form of encouragement.

---

*Prevent aggression with positive reinforcement.*

---





# Socialising young greyhound puppies to create great racers

There are many things that you can do to socialise your puppies.

Table 1 provides suggestions to support good socialisation and environmental enrichment.

**Table 1: Socialisation of puppies**

Age	Environmental Enrichment & Socialisation
0 - 3 weeks of age	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keep puppies with female and littermates unless under veterinary advice.</li> <li>• Provide a safe shelf or covered area in the whelping box so puppies are not crushed or accidentally stepped on.</li> <li>• Handle puppies gently multiple times every day for several minutes at a time – for example while weighing them.</li> <li>• Provide proximity to routine environmental sounds.</li> <li>• Gradually introduce a quiet noise simulation CD.</li> </ul>
3 - 12 weeks of age	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide a variety of different surfaces in the enclosure for exploration e.g. artificial grass, soft bedding, newspaper, hard floor, sand box.</li> <li>• Introduce a variety of toys and squawkers and rotate weekly.</li> <li>• If your pups are not exposed to routine noises, you can gradually introduce quiet noise simulation CD's or a radio.</li> <li>• Provide a minimum of 30 minutes human interaction with the litter daily. Introduce to different people at least once per week.</li> <li>• Introduce to greyhound puppies from another (on-site or vaccinated) litter.</li> <li>• Introduce to other breed(s) of dog (must be vaccinated and preferably small breed).</li> <li>• Introduce wearing collar and leash.</li> </ul>
12 weeks of age to education (after final puppy vaccination)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduce several times a week, food-dispensing toys to encourage foraging (e.g. treat balls, frozen food, raw bones).</li> <li>• Provide a selection of toys and rotate weekly (e.g. rope toys, squeaky toys, chew toys, rubber toys).</li> <li>• Include daily chase games at least until education commences and include exposure to a squawker and synthetic lure.</li> <li>• Provide a minimum of 30 minutes human handling and interaction daily in addition to daily feeding and cleaning routines.</li> <li>• Provide a selection of the activities listed below, at least twice weekly:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– practice walking on a lead</li> <li>– continue exposure to different people and animals.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Also introduce or simulate (if you haven't already) as appropriate for their age:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– vehicles and trailers weekly as short trips</li> <li>– starting box</li> <li>– racetrack environments</li> <li>– pre-race kennels</li> <li>– veterinary tables.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

*Remember that experiences can be short and sweet. It is better for a puppy to have a short positive experience rather than a longer one that becomes overwhelming or frustrating.*

## Socialising juvenile greyhounds to create great racers

It is important that you continue to socialise a greyhound throughout its life.

### Keep introducing your greyhound to new people

Greyhounds, like all dogs, only remain social when continually exposed to unfamiliar people of different ages and genders. Ongoing, positive, exposure to new people will reduce the chance of your greyhound becoming fearful or anxious of humans.

### Keep introducing your dog to other dogs

You do not need to just stick to the same environments such as trial tracks, rearing or education facilities. Young greyhounds muzzled and leashed, can be introduced to other environments, such as dog parks, social occasions with other people's dogs and simple leash walks. Without this experience, greyhounds can lose their ability to know how to behave appropriately around other dogs of other breeds.

### Vary your walks, running and exercise regimes

Try to avoid the same routines every day. Letting a greyhound experience a variety of environments and forms of exercise will provide your growing greyhound with much needed mental stimulation.



### Teach your greyhound to be alone

Greyhounds in training are used to spending some time alone in kennels. Even though they are isolated, they are in familiar environments with the sound and smell of being close to kennel mates. However, greyhounds can still become stressed from being alone (called **separation anxiety**), particularly when they are alone in unfamiliar or new places.

To help your greyhound learn to cope with being alone, and to reduce the chances of developing separation anxiety, consider scheduling occasional, brief periods of time alone in an enriched environment (with toys or treats) with neither people nor other greyhounds close by. A race kennel or crate is a great way to do this. It also has the added benefit of familiarising your greyhound puppy with race day conditions in a controlled positive way.

Always attempt isolation and crating after exercise or free play when your puppy is more tired and needs a rest. The tiredness, combined with the enrichment items, should teach them to settle quickly, and enjoy their crate (alone) time.

### Handling adolescent greyhounds in a stress-free way

Racing greyhounds are usually considered by veterinarians to be very 'compliant' patients. However, before your greyhound goes to the racetrack, it is important that your greyhound is used to being handled by different people. It will make kennelling, veterinary checks, weigh-in and other race meeting procedures much less stressful. Make sure your greyhound is comfortable with different parts of its body being touched. This will ensure that if it must be handled in an emergency it will be less likely to bite.

It is also important to be gentle when catching or restraining greyhounds. You should never allow anyone to roughly handle your greyhound.

## Socialising adult greyhounds to create great racers

Not all greyhounds are well socialised when you receive them as an educator, trainer or owner.

This may be due to a range of reasons including:

- multiple changes in ownerships leading to greyhounds being constantly moved to different facilities;
- poor facilities or husbandry practices by previous carers; and
- previous carers having limited knowledge about the importance of socialisation and/or poor socialisation practices.

New situations are often scary for a greyhound that is not well socialised.

Well-socialised greyhounds have a better chance of adapting to different race and trialling tracks, unfamiliar kennels, unfamiliar dogs and strangers. A well-socialised greyhound will be confident and find new or unusual situations stimulating and not too stressful.

### Socialising adult greyhounds requires keen observation

There are some challenges in providing socialisation activities for greyhounds in training (18 months onwards). As the critical socialisation period is over, a greyhound may have already developed some fear and anxiety to certain stimuli.

Careful planning of activities and keen observation skills are important. Monitoring your greyhound's responses is the best way of providing graduated positive exposure to different people, places and things.

Any program of socialisation must be tailored to the individual greyhound's behaviour. There is little point in getting a greyhound socialised to different handlers by scheduling a series of veterinary appointments and health checks if it has had a recent bad experience.





Play in puppies versus adult dogs

Off-leash play is beneficial to puppies learning behaviour cues, but the same practice can have detrimental effects on adult dogs. Not all greyhounds who reach social maturity (between ages one and three years), enjoy playing with large groups of unfamiliar dogs’ especially if they are only used to interacting with other greyhounds. They may either attempt to avoid the dogs, stand close to their human handler, or even growl and snap at boisterous young dogs that come too close to them. This behaviour is often misidentified as abnormal, when in fact it is quite common. Exposing an adult greyhound to other breeds should be done under close supervision, with a muzzle and a leash or harness.

If you observe that your greyhound is comfortable in the presence of other dogs, start by introducing your greyhound to other breeds individually (one dog at a time). Invite a friend to bring a gentle, easy-going dog on a walk with you and your greyhound, keeping your greyhound muzzled. Allow a polite distance between dogs until they get accustomed to each other, or you can even introduce them to each other through a fence. If both dogs appear relaxed throughout the walk or through the fence, allow them to sniff each other briefly. Keep leashes loose and each interaction short. If either dog appears to be tensing up, call the dogs apart with pleasant, relaxed voices. If body language in both dogs appear loose and tails are wagging,

consider an off-leash session in one of your fenced yards with leashes dragging, using the same short sessions and reinforcement for relaxed behaviour.

A fast greyhound will not perform at the track if it is fearful, anxious and over-stressed by the challenges of unfamiliar people, animals and places. There are many things that you can do to socialise your adult greyhound, some suggestions are provided in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Socialisation of adult greyhounds

Environmental Enrichment & Socialisation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Provide food-dispensing toys to encourage foraging several times a week (e.g. treat balls, frozen food, raw bones).</li><li>• Provide a minimum of 30 minutes human handling and interaction daily in addition to daily feeding and cleaning routines.</li><li>• 1-2 times per week, slowly and gently introduce greyhounds to new surfaces, objects, and places. This should be done after exercise and involve a treat. Day yards or outdoor areas can be used to provide new surfaces and objects for the greyhound to explore in their own time. Greyhounds should be monitored carefully and removed if they show signs of fear and anxiety to try again another day.</li></ul>



## How do I know if my greyhound lacks socialisation and is not coping?

A poorly socialised greyhound is likely to find many things challenging:

- it will struggle to adapt to a kennel environment, or any different environment or situation;
- its fear response can interfere with their motivation to chase, making it difficult to educate;
- even if the greyhound educates, fear and distraction at the racetrack is likely to impact on its racing success;
- it will be more difficult to re-home.

Poorly socialised greyhounds can appear nervous, anxious, distracted or unable to settle.

When presented with unfamiliar things, people or environments, a poorly socialised greyhound may become easily overwhelmed and start doing odd things, like constantly drinking or licking, bopping up and down or chewing on their bedding (these abnormal behaviours are called stereotypies and are not healthy).

If you suspect your greyhound is poorly socialised to humans, other dogs, or important types of environments, you need to begin a gentle and positive program of re-socialisation. If your greyhound is older than 6 months of age, it will take patience and a considerable amount of time and effort.

1. **Seek expert advice.** GAP staff can offer some support as can dog behaviour experts that can be found through a web search.
2. **Identify which type of stimuli (humans, objects, noises, dogs, environments) your greyhound is unfamiliar with or fearful of.**
3. **Offer very short periods of very positive exposure to each stimulus individually, very gradually increasing the amount of exposure.**
4. **Once your dog is comfortable with one fear trigger, move on to the next.**
5. **Do not tackle too many things at once.**

*GRV's Re-homing Guide - Information for Participants has tips on preparing a greyhound for pet life. While you may not be ready to retire your greyhound, the training techniques offered in the booklet may be of use. Visit [www.greyhoundcare.grv.org.au/rehoming](http://www.greyhoundcare.grv.org.au/rehoming) to view or download a copy.*



## Conclusion

### Well socialised greyhounds are resilient, calm and able to adapt to a variety of situations and environments.

They behave positively and politely to humans, other greyhounds and other breeds of dogs.

Well socialised greyhounds are more likely to perform to the best of their ability throughout their life, learning to chase a lure and race successfully.

Well socialised greyhounds are regularly exposed to a variety of people, greyhounds, other dogs and environments from a very young age right through their racing career and into retirement.

Well socialised greyhounds are easier to re-home and promote the sustainability of the sport through positive greyhound welfare and successful, exciting racing.







