

# Greyhound Socialisation

## Scope

These guidelines apply to all greyhounds registered by GRNZ and sets out the requirements for the provision of appropriate socialisation and environmental referencing for greyhounds.

These requirements were introduced under the GRNZ Health and Welfare Standards (published in 2018).

## Purpose

The purpose of this document is to state the requirements for the provision of appropriate socialisation and environmental referencing for greyhounds.

## Principles

Licensed persons raising and handling greyhounds must meet statutory obligations and comply with the Rules of Racing, the GRNZ Health and Welfare Standards and all relevant legislation and codes of welfare. This includes meeting the physical, health, behavioural and emotional needs of animals in their care.

## Background

Appropriate socialisation and environmental referencing are now accepted as being essential for good dog welfare. The acceptance of novel stimuli without fear, known as habituation, is most easily achieved in dogs prior to 8 weeks of age.

Fear and anxiety due to insufficient or inappropriate socialisation is common and has been identified as a significant issue within the Australian and New Zealand greyhound racing industry; impacting both on racing ability and suitability for rehoming. Consequences include increased numbers of “non-chasers”, poor race day performance, kennel distress, hyper-excitability and prolonged post-race recovery. Fearful dogs require protracted periods of “rehabilitation” prior to rehoming, creating bottle necks within the adoption program. Poorly socialised dogs are welfare compromised, may pose a bite risk and are generally not desired as domestic pets.

To enable the number of greyhounds that transition from racing to the pet environment to increase, it is essential that they are reared in a manner that promotes emotional stability and resiliency. Based on current scientific knowledge, it is no longer acceptable practice to leave exposure to a domestic environment (pet home) until the dog is ready for retirement. Similarly, greyhound puppies must be frequently exposed to a variety of race day activities (a variety of unfamiliar people and dogs, leash walking, car travel, kennelling procedures, the lure etc) from a young age; beginning before 8 weeks of age.

Providing the dam is healthy and the puppy has received its first vaccination at least 7 days prior, the risk of contracting disease during carefully considered socialisation programs, is low. This is particularly true when compared to the risk of reduced performance or lifelong behavioural problems due to a lack of exposure. However, the facility or grounds where socialisation occurs must be clean, free of diseased animals and regularly cleaned and or disinfected.

## Key Points

- Good emotional health is dependent on an individual's resiliency and ability to cope with change. It is influenced by a combination of genetics, early rearing and life experiences.
- As a minimum, all persons involved in handling greyhounds should be aware of normal canine body language and be able to recognise the common signs of fear, distress and discomfort.
- To support optimal brain development, greyhounds must be provided with early and appropriate exposure to a wide variety of stimuli that they will likely encounter at every life stage, including retirement.
- Pups must be handled from birth.
- Every effort must be made to expose puppies to a wide variety of different people, other well socialised animals and environments without causing fear
- The primary window of opportunity for successful puppy socialisation and habituation is during the first 12 weeks of life, with the critical time for exposure before 8 weeks of age. This is known as the sensitive period. During this time, the desire to interact with people and the environment outweighs fear.
- Exposure must be continued throughout their development, extending from puppyhood through to rearing, racing and in preparation for retirement.
- Not all exposure is good; puppies will not benefit from a socialisation program if they are showing signs of fear. Any dog exhibiting overt fear should not have further exposure without seeking appropriate advice from a qualified person (eg behaviourist, veterinarian).
- All puppies are individuals with their own learning needs, therefore flexibility within socialisation programs is recommended.
- If socialisation and environmental referencing does not occur during the sensitive period and/or fails to remain ongoing, dishabituation may occur. This is particularly problematic for puppies that may become sick or injured. When illness or injury has the potential to impact on a greyhound participating in the socialisation program, further advice should be sought from a qualified person (eg behaviourist, veterinarian).
- The development of early onset fear or phobias should be taken seriously, and addressed immediately, to minimise the risk of the problem becoming lifelong.
- Puppies born to healthy dams that have been fully vaccinated and that are engaged in a vaccination program themselves are at low risk of contracting infectious diseases. When socialising greyhounds, due caution must be given to the choice of dogs involved and the environment in which socialisation takes place.
- It is not recommended that greyhounds are taken to off leash parks to interact with other breeds.
- Enrolling in puppy classes prior to three months of age and older puppy classes thereafter offers the opportunity for juvenile greyhounds to socialise in a safe environment with other breeds.

## Glossary

**Stimuli:** Any sight, sound, smell, other dogs and animals, people or environment that the greyhound will experience at any stage of its life.

**Sensitive period:** Currently believed to be birth to 8 weeks of age. This is the time in which a dogs rapidly developing brain can benefit from exposure to a stimulus. A lack of adequate socialisation and environmental referencing during this time will increase the likelihood of fear, anxiety and phobias with associated poor performance.

Environmental referencing: Exposure to the environments the puppy is expected to encounter during its life during the sensitive period when the puppy is least likely to be fearful, thus it is more likely to habituate to those environments.

Socialisation: The development of a relationship with living and non-living parts of the environment that the dog will be exposed to at all stages of their life. Socialisation is most successful if introduced during the sensitive period and provided ongoing throughout life. Adult dogs can be socialised, but only if they are in a positive emotional state. Fear and anxiety prohibit socialisation, leading to sensitisation instead.

Social exposure: exposing puppies to relevant stimuli during the sensitive period.

Habituation: The process of stopping reacting to meaningless stimuli through exposure. This is vital so that the animal can distinguish which stimuli are important and which ones can be ignored. Being reared in a rural location does not give a dog adequate exposure to the same range of stimuli they will experience on both a race day and within a domestic environment. Habituation to stimuli must occur before 8 weeks of age, with the process remaining ongoing throughout life.

Dishabituation: A loss of habituation to a stimulus due to re-exposure during a period of stress or fear, with sudden or excessive levels of exposure.

Sensitisation: The opposite of habituation. If an animal experiences fear to a stimulus it is likely to become more fearful on subsequent exposure, not less. The potential for sensitisation instead of habituation is greatest when the puppy is 10 – 16 weeks of age. Sudden exposure at this time to new experiences can have a permanent and damaging effect upon the dog's ability to self-calm.

Emotional resiliency: The ability to cope with life's challenges and adapt to new and stressful situations

## **Minimum requirements for social exposure and environmental referencing**

### *The pivotal role of the littermaster and breeder*

Given habituation to novel stimuli is best achieved prior to 8 weeks of age, the littermaster is largely responsible for ensuring that puppies receive initial adequate social exposure and environmental referencing.

A predisposition to fear and anxiety is heritable. Breeding females and stud dogs chosen for breeding must be calm, sociable and well adjusted.

Furthermore, the environment immediately before, and in the weeks after birth, are critical for promoting the development of calm, non-reactive dogs. Prenatal (i.e. within the womb) exposure to the neurochemicals associated with stress can predispose puppies to developing fear, anxiety and phobias even with adequate social exposure.

Fearful breeding females make poor role models for their puppies as they do not exhibit, and therefore teach, relaxed behaviours around normal stimuli.

Puppies must not be separated from their dam or littermates until 8 weeks of age, wherever possible.

Social exposure and environmental referencing **must** start during this time and should follow the general requirements as outlined in Table 1.

- Note: if a puppy shows fear, withdrawal or avoidance at any stage, stop the exposure and seek further advice from a qualified person (eg behaviourist, veterinarian).

**Table 1.** Social exposure and environmental referencing requirements.

AGE	SOCIAL EXPOSURE AND ENVIRONMENTAL REFERENCING REQUIRED WITH EXAMPLES	PROBLEMS THAT ARE LIKELY TO OCCUR IF EXPOSURE IS MISSED
<p><b>1 – 2 WEEKS</b></p>	<p><b>Daily exposure to gentle touch and handling</b></p> <p>Puppies must be picked up and gently stroked from 1 – 2 weeks of age for a few minutes several times a day.</p> <p><i>The mild stress associated with picking the puppy up is also beneficial for increasing resiliency to stress later in life.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Altered sensitivity to touch.</li> <li>• Fear of, and aversion to, being touched and handled, later in life.</li> <li>• Hyper-reactivity and an inability to self-calm.</li> <li>• Fear, chronic stress and anxiety.</li> </ul>
<p><b>2 – 8 WEEKS</b></p>	<p><b>Exposure to a variety of people, sights, smells, sounds and environments</b></p> <p><i>It is highly desirable to use treats during these interactions to help promote a positive emotional connection with both people and handling.</i></p>	
	<p>Puppies must receive continued exposure to, and receive gentle handling, by both familiar and unfamiliar people, including children.</p> <p>Pups must be introduced to handling in a manner reflective of how they might be examined as an adult race dog. Examples include gently lifting all four feet, touching their toes, habituating them to people leaning over them and gently palpating their muscles.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fear of, or poor sociability to humans.</li> <li>• Fear of, and aversion to, being touched and handled later in life.</li> <li>• Increased risk of aggression.</li> <li>• Stress induced poor performance.</li> </ul>
	<p>Daily interactions must include the introduction of everyday items the puppies will be exposed to at every life stage, such as brushes, collars and rugs.</p> <p>A range of toys should also be introduced. Interactive or treat dispensing toys are highly encouraged during this time as a means of encouraging exploration, increasing cognitive ability and building self-confidence.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fear of novel objects.</li> <li>• A lack of plasticity in behavioural responses.</li> </ul>

	<p>Puppies must be exposed to a range of domestic and race day items, for example bikes, prams and starting boxes, both inanimately and moving (where appropriate), within their environment.</p>	
	<p>Puppies must experience a variety of novel sights, smells, experiences and noises including those they will be exposed to during training, kennelling and racing.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fear and conflict associated with race day activities.</li> <li>• Kennel distress.</li> <li>• Poor performance and impeded post-race recovery.</li> </ul>
	<p>Puppies must experience frequent short car trips.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Travel poorly; poor performance and post-race-recovery.</li> </ul>
	<p>Puppies must be regularly exposed to domestic environments and noises, including televisions, washing machines, vacuum cleaners etc.</p> <p>Puppies must be provided with a range of safe food or toy options to chew. Chewing is a species specific behaviour in dogs that reduces stress levels and promotes a positive emotional state.</p> <p>Early exposure to kennels in conjunction with an appropriate chewing option may reduce the risk and severity of kennel distress later in life. It also provides an opportunity for the pups to chew in isolation, whilst still in the presence of other dogs.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poor transition to rehoming.</li> <li>• Increased risk of separation related distress, aggression and relinquishment.</li> <li>• Reluctance to chew as an adult with associated increased risk of dental disease.</li> <li>• Reduced opportunities to encourage self-calming.</li> <li>• Boredom, frustration.</li> <li>• Kennel distress, boredom, frustration.</li> <li>• Increased risk of separation related distress.</li> </ul>
	<p>Puppies must be given multiple opportunities to engage in supervised play with a variety of calm, socially compatible, vaccinated dogs. This may include greyhound puppies of a similar age from different litters. It is strongly recommended that puppies are exposed to a variety of other breeds of dogs during this time.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Greyhounds exposed to only their littermates prior to 8 weeks of age are at risk of being fearful for life of other greyhounds, dog breeds and people.</li> <li>• Increased risk of marring and fighting.</li> <li>• Increased risk of aggression towards other dogs as a pet.</li> </ul>

<b>8 WEEKS TO 20 WEEKS</b>	<p>This age is designed to be an intense period of ongoing learning and exploration of novel environments.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fear of humans and aversion to handling.</li> <li>• Dishabituation of previous socialisation and environmental referencing.</li> <li>• Sensitisation.</li> </ul>
	<p>Puppies in this age group must continue to be provided with multiple and frequent opportunities to engage with a diverse range of social, travelling, training, kennelling, racing and domestic situations as previously outlined. House training is optimal if undertaken during this time.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chronic fear and anxiety.</li> <li>• Kennel distress.</li> <li>• Separation related distress.</li> <li>• Substrate preferences may develop, such as only toileting on concrete. This is problematic for adoption families and can lead to relinquishment.</li> </ul>
	<p>Puppies must begin to learn to walk on a leash.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fear.</li> </ul>
	<p>Prior to being vaccinated, puppies can be taken into public, with care. Avoid public areas, such as off leash parks, that may be frequented by dogs that are not vaccinated.</p> <p>Once fully vaccinated, puppies must be regularly exercised on leash in public places, away from their home property.</p> <p><b><i>Care should be taken to not overwhelm the puppy due to the risk of sensitisation at this time</i></b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fear, anxiety, phobias to a wide range of stimuli.</li> </ul>
<b>20 WEEKS ONWARDS</b>	<p>The ongoing provision of opportunities to engage in social interactions with people and a range of environments is required to continue to build and maintain a puppy's emotional resilience for the rest of its life.</p>	<p>Puppies that miss this exposure by 14 weeks of age, (for example if they don't leave the property or meet new people) are unlikely to voluntarily explore new environments for the rest of their life. They are likely to be very timid and at great risk of becoming phobic of new things with associated profound panic. This may manifest as aggression, freezing on walks and separation related distress.</p>