

Chapter 2

Case studies on training mine detection dogs

Part 1

Socialising puppies for demining

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Introduction

As people who are rearing our own potential demining dogs, we have, through time and practical experience, created what we believe is a unique way of rearing a working dog in a kennel environment.

Through rearing and working with different breeds, we must also point out that each breed is different to another, which seems logical as each breed was intentionally bred for a specific purpose. In practice, each breed is so different that there is no choice but to treat them all differently.

Even when working with one breed, no set system of training can be applied because no two puppies or dogs are the same. What you do and how you do it will be applied

differently to each dog. It all depends on how well you know them and if you have the natural ability to “read” their behaviour.

Negative experiences during the socialising period will have an effect on mutual trust between the animal and the other animals, and with humans. Young animals which have a variety of positive influences during this time are better equipped than animals that grow up in a closed environment. Lack of socialisation may lead to behavioural problems such as aggression or fear.



Choice of parents

What are the most important qualities we look for in our demining dogs?



The ideal parents for our requirements are those which are not only still acceptable in the show ring but also carry our desired genetically-inherited working traits.

In their physical appearance we look for:

- Good colour and pigmentation;
- Ears that stand erect and are standard size for the breed;
- Correct size according to breed standards; and
- They must be hip dysplasia free.

In their temperament we look for dogs which are:

- Highly adaptable;
- Courageous;
- Outgoing;
- Stable;
- Not nervous;
- Have good intra-species relationships;
- Have excessive drive, hunting and herding instinct.

Care of the dam

The bitch is moved to the whelping den two weeks before giving birth. She is still groomed and taken for daily walks. To ensure a healthy pregnancy and puppies, the bitch is given a balanced diet to help her recover from the birth.

The whelping den is a large grass camp which contains a kennel with underfloor heating.



The new arrivals



Clearly, the mother plays an important part in the lives of the pups and the bonding between them is also very important. It is also important that the puppies pass successfully through the imprinting stage of their development: if a puppy does not learn certain behaviours at this stage, its adult life is adversely influenced.

We do not believe it is our place, or right, to constantly interfere in a perfectly natural and normal part of life. We prefer to keep our distance but do check that all is going well with the mother and her new pups. We keep a constant eye on possible complications with the dam's milk supply and ensure she has enough to keep all the puppies satisfied.



The socialisation process for the first 16 weeks

Neonatal period (0–2 weeks)

This period is about getting nourishment from the mother. A puppy this age can only move within a small radius. The puppies crawl and come into contact with the mother's breast and begin sucking movements. Their eyes are closed and so are their ears.

During this time we believe in mildly stressing the puppies for the following reasons:

- It will enable them to cope better with stress;
- They will be more outgoing;
- It enables them to learn faster;
- It is believed to increase the brain size.

The stress is applied in the following manner:

First week:

Day 1: Each puppy is held down firmly on one side for 10 to 20 seconds.

Day 2: Each puppy is held down firmly on the other side for the same length of time.

Days 3-7: Each puppy is held up in the air, upside down, turned in a circle. Puppies must be weighed daily on a cool surface.



Second week:

The stress is intensified by squeezing the ear flap and the webbing between the toes. Each puppy is placed on a wax wrap just taken out of the fridge.

Transition period (third week)



The puppies can move around more and their eyes will open. They can eat solid food and will also start growling over a bone and begin play-fighting with their littermates. They will also start walking.

In this week we introduce novel stimuli to the whelping area — by providing them with plastic milk bottles, safe toys, knotted strips of cloth, cardboard boxes, balls, feathers, etc. We also introduce audio stimuli in the form of a radio playing at a low volume, increasing in volume over time. We still handle the puppies daily, talking to them and giving them individual attention.



Socialisation (3–6 weeks)

The puppies now begin to make more varied sounds and begin to respond to the sight or sound of people and animals. They can lap up water or milk and begin to assume the adult form of locomotion and chewing. They also begin to follow each other around.



We still give individual attention and auditory stimuli. For short periods they are taken out of the den into new buildings and areas. They are exposed to new sounds, noises and moving items. They are provided with new objects, e.g. empty plastic bags, empty boxes, dark rooms, moving chairs on wheels and toys that they can bite and retrieve.

At this stage we also start to feed them and the feeding times are combined with gunshots from a distance of 100-200 metres. They are also exposed to idling cars, small fans and strange people. We do not believe in carrying the puppies around: it is of vital importance that their curiosity leads them to investigate their new surroundings. This is still a gradual process which cannot be rushed. The puppies must progress at their own pace and must never be forced. The mother can also go with them on these socialising trips to give the puppies more confidence.

This period may sound very easy, but it is an extremely important one. The handler of the puppies must be aware of all normal behaviour patterns of this age and must react accordingly. The puppies are taken regularly for car rides of short distances. We introduce them to our office, where they experience a great variety of new and different articles. We make so many changes that every time they think they know what to expect, we will surprise them by adding something new and moving the not-so-new items they are already accustomed to. We encourage them to get into air transport crates similar to those they will be transported in when older.



We bring them into frequent contact with people they do not know. They are introduced to machines like lawnmowers, generators, fans, vacuum cleaners, etc. This age is extremely versatile. It is impossible to exhaust your resources in finding new challenges for them. Everything up to now has been done in a puppy group. In some cases the mother will go along to give the puppies more confidence.

Socialisation (6–8 weeks)

A puppy at this age has already had its first introduction to people. It should never feel dominated by us and will not be socialised in a litter anymore. The mother will already have started weaning the puppies.

Our puppies are leash trained at this age and will walk alone with their handler on a leash. The socialising will also be done on a leash. No punishment is inflicted on the puppies.

They are now used to the gunshots and have learned that it has never caused them physical pain. We continue with all our socialising processes. When they are eight weeks old, they are separated from their mother, whom we move out of the camp. Situations which may evoke intense and stressful reactions are avoided but are sometimes necessary. A puppy should never be praised for being afraid, rather ignored.



We continue introducing them to new people in new places. They are encouraged to negotiate new obstacles like boulders, trees and rocky areas where loose stones may slide under them, sand pits, dunes, gravelled surfaces, water and small rivers. Other obstacles include steps made from different materials, e.g., grid or bricks. The list of what we try to expose them to is endless.



The relationship formed with the handler is of vital importance. If done incorrectly it will become progressively more difficult for the pup to adapt to the changes it will have to encounter. From a young age we place great emphasis on encouraging the puppies to retrieve objects for us, indirectly increasing prey-drive. And at this stage the nature of the object is irrelevant. We make a great fuss if something is retrieved for us, so that the pup eventually does this automatically if it is with us.

The pup has already learned that, to be fussed over, it must have something in its mouth. This is very important for further training. Obstacles can still be done in a small group.

Socialisation (8–12 weeks)

We still continue with the daily routine of socialising sessions. This includes going to shopping centres, train stations, city centres, etc. These sessions will increase in time and intensity. The puppies also have retrieving sessions during which they are taught to use their noses.



When the puppies are eight weeks old, we wean them completely. They have already learned important things from their mother and are now ready to be without her. During the day, once returned from their socialising trips, we prefer to leave them in an obstacle course. This is a camp that consists of many obstacles that the puppies learn to overcome through trial and error.

Socialisation (12–13 weeks)

The puppies start sleeping in pairs in kennels overnight. Throughout the day they will still be in camps. Socialising continues as normal. We like to take them to city centres where there are lots of people, shops, cars, buses, trucks, etc.



Aggression training can be done at the kennels to give the dogs confidence in their kennels. Gunshots are still part of the daily routine. By this age shooting can be done from 5-10 metres away. Fireworks, especially crackers, are also used for this exercise.

Socialisation (13–14 weeks)



The puppies are now separated from their littermates. They also now sleep alone and are worked individually. They go for long daily trips of three to four hours. They are also taken to shopping centres, train stations, bus and truck depots.



If necessary, aggression training is done away from the kennel to give the dog more confidence. Transportation of the dogs to the socialising places is done with different vehicles (if available) e.g. trucks, pick-ups and dog trailers.

Weekly evaluations monitor improvements in their play-drive, socialising, confidence and character.



Socialisation (14–16 weeks)

Aggression sessions continue, but special care is taken not to increase their aggression levels above those that will be expected from them in their future working conditions.

These sessions are very positive and are based on play-drive. They are conducted only by experienced puppy assailants who know how to build confidence without eliciting fear in the puppy. Even though they become more confident, they are still treated with great care as they are still in a sensitive period.

Socialising also continues.

Programme for 4-8 months

We continue our daily routine of socialising. At this age, puppies will cut their permanent teeth and this will affect their ability to retrieve items and this must be taken into consideration.

Young dogs have been taken to the advanced obstacle course. Every second day they are taken for three to four hours to shopping centres, train stations, schools, etc.



We continue with aggression training and gunshots.

By now the socialising and aggression sessions have become more intense, which helps to strengthen the dog's character.

Programme for 8-12 months

All dogs start obedience training at eight months.

Socialising continues with three- to four-hour trips to different places. They then begin their formal demining course. We believe that a dog of 12 months of age is mature and confident enough to begin this formal demining training.

