

## **Abstract Submissions**

The theme of the 2022 conference is: **Strengthening Connections**

Presentations can encompass a range of areas, including collaboration, establishing new markets, developing innovative ways of working and exploring continuous improvement. The Conference Programme Committee will consider all presentations that support the conference theme.

The Conference Programme Committee are looking for presentations (both plenary and workshop sessions) that cover all areas of a guide organisation, from the dogs themselves to all the support functions needed to run a successful organisation. This could cover a range of topics including:

- **Breeding**
- **Puppy raising**
- **Behaviour**
- **Welfare**
- **Evaluation (early training)**
- **Training**
- **Matching**
- **Client Work**
- **Management**
- **Human resources / Education**
- **Marketing and Fundraising**
- **Working together**

## **No Dog is an Island**

Our presentation embraces the 2023 IGDF conference theme of Strengthening Connections specifically within the See Differently Guide and Assistance Dog Service incorporating topics of Puppy Raising, Behaviour, Evaluation and Working Together.

The title is drawn from the famous John Donne poem and is designed to invoke the idea that each facet of the organization is critical to our success and it is in all our interests to ensure collaboration between departments.

Every Guide and Assistance Dog organisation face their own unique challenges specific to their particular circumstances. However, many schools share a common problem, that being, how to improve the efficiency of our organisations and in turn the success rates of working dogs. The significant resources required to produce Guide Dogs including infrastructure, personnel and monetary, demand that we continue to investigate ways in which we can more effectively and sustainably meet the need for these life changing dogs.

A common structure of Guide Dogs Services, particularly smaller schools such as See Differently, is a Puppy Department that oversees breeding and Puppy Raising / Educating from birth until they enter formal training from 12 to 18 months of age. From there the dogs commence formal training as either Guide Dogs with a Guide Dog Trainer (GDT) or Guide Dog Mobility Instructor (GDMI) or enter an assistance dog program such as Autism, PTSD etc. On successful completion of formal training the dog is allocated to a client.

However, this structure can create a number of impediments to achieving the goal of providing Guide and Assistance dogs including:

- Interaction between departments can be limited
- Career progression often sees staff begin work in Puppy Education and gradually move to roles that require additional training such as Guide Dog Trainer, Assistance Dog Trainer, Guide Dog Mobility Instructor etc.
- This can mean staff with less formalised training are working with pups and volunteers during a critical period of pups development and for the longest period i.e. 0 – 15 months.
- Volunteers are critical to the success of a Guide Dog program. Without adequate support they can become disgruntled and either leave the role or take training matters into their own hands.

There is significant research that states the timing and quality of a dog's early experiences is crucially important. This view is reflected in an article *Raising an Assistance Dog Puppy – Stakeholder Perspectives on What Helps and What Hinders 2020*, by Mai et al in which they state that “experiences during the puppy raising period are critical to behavioural development and could reduce fearfulness and anxiety if managed correctly”. Fear and anxiety being common reasons for the withdrawal of dogs from programs.

There is no doubt that genetics are a factor in whether a dog progresses to a working role in that they bestow different capacities and can predispose a dog to behave in a certain way. However the extent to which these tendencies develop can be drastically modified by learning and are largely dependent on the dogs experiences and the input of its handler (The influence of inheritance and environment on canine behavior: myth and fact, Serpell JA [JA Serpell - Journal of Small Animal Practice, 1987 - researchgate.net](#)). This view is supported by others who claim that the most essential feature from the dogs point of view is the owner and it would be only natural to expect dogs to respond to changes in the owner's status. For example, just as children respond to change in the emotional states of their parents (O'Farrell 1986) has presented evidence of an association between certain behaviour problems in dogs and a variety of neurotic or over-indulgent attitudes in their owners.

If we accept this commonly held view then it follows that to optimise puppy rearing outcomes, organisations should invest greater resources into improving puppy raising practices (Socialisation, Training, and Help-Seeking Specific Puppy Raising Practices That Predict Desirable Behaviours in Trainee Assistance Dog Puppies, 2021, Mai et al).

### **Hypothesis**

Our hypothesis is therefore that earlier intervention during the puppy phase by experienced staff who are often better placed to identify behaviours and temperamental characteristics that directly impact the dog will benefit the program in a number of ways including:

- Upskilling Puppy Staff
- Improving support of volunteers leading to greater engagement and retention
- Improved quality of dogs in training
- Reduced training times
- Higher success rates

To test our hypothesis See Differently created a Case Study in which a GDMI conducted an informal assessment of a 6 month dog through observation of walks with the Puppy Educator in a variety of

environments. Strategies were then implemented to address the identified problems. Regular contact was maintained to observe progress and adjust strategies where necessary. These sessions also enabled prevention of common problems or training deficiencies typically seen in dogs commencing formal training.

### **Solution / Findings**

The dog in this study adapted to training more quickly due to:

- Greater familiarity with the formal training environment including office, vehicles and staff.
- Increased engagement with volunteer Puppy Educator leading to improved understanding of specific Guide Dog skills such as speed and tension, leading out and how to build tension etc
- Better understanding by PE of play behaviour including the distinction of various types of Dog Distraction and how to address them

Further the program has been continued with another puppy commencing at 12 weeks

### **Result**

Whilst only a single sample, the success of this pup and its relatively smooth progression through formal training has led the Guide Dog Manager and See Differently Executive to investigate the opportunity to engage an Intake Coordinator to bring these benefits to a broader cross section of the dogs in their Puppy Program.

### **References**

# Socialisation, Training, and Help-Seeking Specific Puppy Raising Practices That Predict Desirable Behaviours in Trainee Assistance Dog Puppies

- February 2021
- [Applied Animal Behaviour Science](#) 236(March 2021):
- it is recommended that, to ensure optimal puppy rearing outcomes, organisations should invest resources in improving and supervising puppy raisers practices, particularly through promoting a help-seeking culture amongst puppy raisers and through sharing the experiences of previous puppy raisers.

Socialisation, training, and help-seeking – Specific puppy raising practices that predict desirable behaviours in trainee assistance dog puppies Dac L. Mai a, \*, Tiffani Howell a, Pree Benton b, Pauleen C. Bennett **Applied Animal Behaviour Science** Volume 236, March 2021, 105259

A literature review by Rooney et al. (2016) recommends three practices for raising less fearful and anxious puppies, including: 1) selection of puppies suitable for their intended roles, 2) managing fearfulness and anxiety-provoking activities during puppyhood, and 3) introducing potential stressors in a controlled and positive manner. Implementing the first recommendation is clearly the responsibility of breeding and training staff. However, individual puppy raisers are ultimately responsible for managing puppy experiences during the raising period. Guidance and support from host organisations only indirectly influence puppies' behavioural outcomes via directly influencing puppy raisers' practices. Because early developmental stages, when puppies typically stay with a volunteer puppy raiser, are critical for their behavioural development (Appleby et al., 2002; Vaterlaws-Whiteside and Hartmann, 2017), it is worthwhile investigating how puppy raising practices contribute to desirable adult behaviours and also what factors influence puppy raising practices.

## Recommendations for organisations

While organisations work to improve the effectiveness of their recommended training techniques and puppy selection, they should also pay attention to improving the actual practices of their raisers, particularly their engagement in puppy socialisation and training. These practices are central to puppies' behavioural development. One way to do this may be to enlist the support of experienced puppy raisers to help mentor less experienced puppy raisers. More formal types of support, such as that provided by dog trainers, veterinarians, and technical training platforms, may be useful when complex issues are encountered, but the participants in our study preferred to seek advice from other puppy raisers. Staff responsible for puppy raising programs should also strongly promote help-seeking behaviour amongst their raisers, which would allow these volunteers to benefit from any supports made available. It is essential that, when giving a higher priority to improving raiser practices, organisations should ensure quality management and oversight of their raiser training and support programs.

### 5. Conclusions

Puppy raisers typically provide training and socialisation to puppies under supervision of host assistance dog organisations. Although early learning experiences during this stage are critical to puppies' behavioural development, it was unclear how much impact puppy raisers' practices and provision of support for these volunteers may have on this process. This study is the first in the assistance dog literature to examine raiser practices, namely socialisation, training, and help-seeking behaviour, in a large and diverse sample of puppy raisers. Socialisation and training predicted most behavioural traits, including trainability, general anxiety, adaptability,

and excitability. Among various supports either from their organisation or from their external networks, puppy raisers' mentors or counsellors contributed the most to positive ratings of raiser socialisation and training practices. These effects, however, were mediated by the raisers' help-seeking behaviour. In short, puppy raisers' practices (i.e., socialisation and training of the puppies) should be acknowledged as direct influencers of puppy behaviour. Improving raiser practices was most effective when the support came from puppy raiser mentors or counsellors, with the condition that the puppy raisers were willing to seek help.