

The Pawfect Storm: High levels of problem behaviours and punishment-based training in the UK “Pandemic Puppies” cohort

- **Problem behaviours** (i.e. behaviours that owners find problematic) are a leading cause of **relinquishment** and **euthanasia** of young dogs
- **“Pandemic Puppies”** bought during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic were exposed to many **risk factors for problem behaviours**, including..
 - more likely to be **bought by first-time owners**
 - **missing out on key puppy socialisation experiences** (e.g., puppy classes)
 - more likely to be **bought from poor welfare sources**



This study aimed to explore the impact of these early-life risk factors, and owner management strategies (including training methods), upon problem behaviours in a UK cohort of Pandemic Puppies aged 21 months.

We followed a cohort of 985 puppies from when they were <16 weeks old, to when they were 21-months old, and found...



96.7% of owners reported their dog had at least one problem behaviour

The top 5 most common behaviours reported were:

Pulling on the lead (67%) ←

Jumping up at people (57%) ←

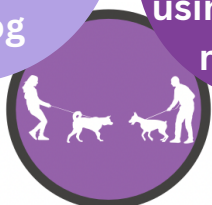
Not coming back when called (52%) ←

Chasing (e.g., cats, wildlife, traffic) (35%) ←

Barking or howling (33%) ←

5
Average number
of problem
behaviours
per dog

**MORE
COMMON**
in dogs trained
using aversive
methods



82.3% of owners reported using at least one ‘aversive’ training method



- **Aversive methods**, those that **‘punish’** dogs, and have previously been shown to be associated with increased **aggression**, **fear** and **anxiety**
- Owners using **‘aversive’** methods were **more likely to report problem behaviours** in their dogs - suggesting these methods are often ineffective
- Owners of **large dogs (30-40kg)** were more likely to use aversive methods
- Owners who **bought a specific breed/crossbreed because they thought it would be easy to train** were more likely to use aversive methods

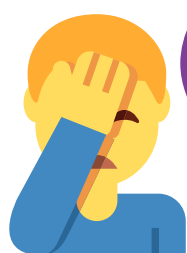


But...**owners who attended online puppy classes** were less likely to use aversive methods



TAKE HOME MESSAGE: Using punishment-based training does not help to improve dog behaviour problems, could cause more problems, and can damage your relationship with them.

Owners Expectations vs. Realities of Behaviour and Training



33%

Thought training their dog was harder than expected

First-time owners

were more likely to think training their dog was **harder** than they expected



15%

Thought their dog’s behaviour was worse than expected

Owners of large dogs (>40kg)

were more likely to think their dog’s behaviour was **worse** than they expected

TAKE HOME MESSAGE: Dogs of all shapes and sizes are complex animals and need extensive, lifelong training to fit acceptably within our human lives and expectations. Make sure you are well-prepared, realistic and able to meet these needs when considering taking on a dog or puppy.

Recommendations for dog owners



If you have any concerns about your dog’s behaviour, contact your vet who can physically examine your dog (*as many behaviour problems are related to health*), take a thorough history and suggest further investigations and treatment/management options as necessary

If your dog missed out on puppy classes, it’s not too late!

Even if you are an experienced dog owner, you could benefit from the latest information on dog training from a science-based dog trainer; find one in your area via the ABTC



If you have more serious concerns about your dog’s behaviour, talk to your vet about a referral to an accredited animal behaviourist - many problem behaviours can be successfully managed and/or treated if approached appropriately!

[For more information visit](#)

www.rvc.ac.uk/vetcompass/research-projects-and-opportunities/projects/rvc-pandemic-puppies-survey



With thanks to Battersea for funding this research.

BATTERSEA

[CLICK TO READ FULL PAPER](#)

Brand, C. L., O’Neill, D. G., Belshaw, Z., Dale, F. I., Merritt, B. L., Clover, K. N., Tay, M.-X. M., Pegram, C. L., and Packer, R. M. A. (2023). Impacts of puppy early life experiences, puppy-purchasing practices and owner characteristics on owner-reported problem behaviours in a UK Pandemic Puppies cohort at 21 months of age. *Animals*