

2011 Seminar Highlights “Windows of Opportunity”

At the 2011 PCA Foundation Seminar, board certified veterinary behaviorist Chris Pachel, DVM, DACVB, shared his expertise in the art and science of puppy socialization—and answered many good questions.

Behavior is a major killer of young dogs, Dr. Pachel pointed out, underscoring the critical “Windows of Opportunity” for breeders as we strive to produce puppies with sound temperaments, prepare those puppies for life with their new families and help owners build on their puppy’s good start.

Dr. Pachel began by reviewing the compelling studies supporting what experience teaches us as breeders—that dogs inherit much of their basic temperament. In a surprise for many, however, he pointed out that chronic mental stress during a bitch’s pregnancy may permanently alter temperament in her puppies. How many of us have heard about a repeat breeding (That first litter was awesome, such confident showy puppies!) where the bitch carried her puppies during a nasty divorce, major illness or other intense stress in her human family, and six months later most of those puppies had problems like shyness, anxiety and hyper-vigilance, nothing like pups in the first litter. What happened?

Evidence in both human and animal studies continues to mount that chronic stress during pregnancy triggers changes that can permanently alter offspring health and behavior, Dr. Pachel said, even potentially causing genetic shifts that pass to the next generation. For example, a Danish study published this year in the *American Journal of Epidemiology* tracked 1.67 million children born between 1977 and 2004. The researchers found that children had a much higher risk for infectious disease (including need for hospitalization) and other problems if their mother, during her pregnancy, had experienced a divorce or the death of a spouse or child.

Chronic stress is the potential problem for our pregnant bitches, Dr. Pachel emphasized, and it’s unlikely that a single stressful event like being shipped for breeding would lead to similar issues.

As he discussed socialization for puppies at every development stage, Dr. Pachel stressed that breeders must ensure continued learning as they pass the socialization torch to new owners. Just as most people don’t know much about cars and rely on an owner’s manual or mechanic, most people don’t know much about dogs and need “owner’s manual” guidance of breeders serving as an ongoing resource.

In his behavior practice today compared with five years ago, Dr. Pachel said he sees more emotionally reactive dogs lacking impulse control. Imagine, for example, the strapping pup on leash, dragging its owner while lunging at other dogs! As breeders, we can help owners teach puppies boundaries and avoid common mistakes such as rewarding the wrong behavior (for example, a soothing “It’s ok, it’s ok” for that lunging pup or for puppies hesitating in new situations) or forcing timid, cringing pups into every park and

store when they need a more gradual approach to gain confidence. As well as making ourselves available, Dr. Pachel noted, we can provide guidelines, whether our own written tips on housebreaking, etc., or our suggestions on helpful books, web sites such as www.dogstardaily.com (also helpful for breeders!) and well-structured puppy classes.

“If you remember one thing from this lecture,” he said, “remember the Windows of Opportunity. At each stage of a puppy’s development, ask yourself, what can I do now? How can I influence this dog’s future?”

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Published in PCA’s Newsletter, The Poodle Papers, Spring 2011