

The benefits of early socialisation

Industry Practice Guide 12.0



Greyhound Welfare Code of Practice

Relevant Standards:

7.1 All greyhounds, including puppies from the age of 3 weeks, must be provided with daily exposure to humans through gentle handling. **R**

7.2 All puppies and greyhounds older than 8 weeks of age must be provided with regular contact with, and exposure to, other vaccinated dogs that are compatible. **R**

7.3 Participants must provide greyhounds in their care with opportunities for expression of normal canine behaviours, to prevent stress and anxiety. If a greyhound shows signs of stress or anxiety that do not resolve quickly, or exhibits stereotypic behaviours, participants must seek veterinary treatment. **R**

Puppies aged 0–8 weeks

7.4 Each day, puppies aged 0–8 weeks must be provided with:

- a) access to normal puppy activity and play with its mother and littermates;
- b) exposed to a variety of surfaces; and,
- c) a variety of toys.

Puppies aged 8–16 weeks

7.5 Puppies aged 8–16 weeks must be provided with:

- a) a minimum of one hour per day to run or play within a secure area outside of the greyhound housing area, and
- b) access to toys for interactive play.

7.6 During each week, puppies aged 8–16 weeks must be provided with three or more of the following:

- a) lessons in how to walk on a lead whilst wearing a collar;
- b) chasing games for play;
- c) training to respond to basic verbal commands;
- d) exposure to a variety of surfaces;
- e) exposure to new experiences;
- f) a variety of toys;
- g) travel in cars or trailers;
- h) exposure to different levels (such as walking up and down stairs).

7.7 Puppies aged 8–16 weeks must be housed in groups or pairs, unless directed otherwise by a veterinarian.

Greyhounds older than 16 weeks which have not yet commenced training

7.8 Greyhounds older than 16 weeks which have not yet commenced training for racing must be provided with:

- a) access to a secure area outside of the greyhound housing area for play, for a minimum of five hours each day;
- b) interactive play or obedience training each day; and,
- c) each week, two or more of the following -
 - reward-based training;
 - walking on a lead;
 - travel in cars or trailers;
 - racing-related activities (such as access to starting boxes, circular training facilities, straight tracks, lures or race-day cages).

Pregnant or lactating greyhounds

7.9 Pregnant or lactating greyhounds must be provided with:

- a) access to an exercise yard or walked on a lead for at least 60 minutes each day,
- b) access to toys at all times, where this is beneficial to the greyhound.

Exercise, socialisation and enrichment (ESE) plan

7.12 Participants must have a written plan detailing how the Exercise, Socialisation and Enrichment standards in this Code will be met for the greyhounds in their care.

7.13 An Exercise, Socialisation and Enrichment Plan may be temporarily varied or suspended where a greyhound is undergoing veterinary treatment and requires rest or rehabilitation as part of its treatment.

The Commission has a template ESE plan to help participants to meet this requirement.

To access the template, go to the Commission's website: www.gwic.nsw.gov.au

Early education and socialisation of young greyhounds can improve their chances of racing success and also help with rehoming.

Socialisation means exposing and allowing the pups to interact in a positive manner with anything a greyhound may encounter in racing or later on as a pet, including new people, places, dogs, and other animals.

Why does training for racing start when greyhounds are so young?

The aim of early education and socialisation is to get young greyhounds familiar with a range of people, animals and challenging situations early in life.

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This experience in a safe and controlled situation will help to reduce the greyhound's fear and anxiety in new or potentially stressful situations in the future.

It is important to ensure this is done in a safe and encouraging way and that the pup associates these new experiences with positive things such as food, praise or play.

Begin slowly at first, gradually increasing the number of encounters and the time spent socialising as the puppy becomes more confident.

Being exposed to lots of different things in a positive way creates greyhounds that are generally more approachable, more behaviourally stable, and more able to cope in different situations. For example, entering a car or kennel block for the first time, a trial track, or the race-day environment.

What happens if this early education and socialisation period is missed?

A greyhound which misses out on this early education is likely to find many things challenging:

- it will struggle to adapt to a new kennel environment;
- its fear response can inhibit or block its chase motivation, making it difficult to break in; and
- even if it breaks-in, fear and distraction at the racetrack may impact on its racing success.

Why would a greyhound be fearful of new things?

Fear responses keep animals safe, as they are a survival mechanism. Every animal must learn very early in life about their environment, and their behaviours in response to people and the environment.

Early exposure to different and new stimuli teaches the young animal about what to seek out, what to avoid, and what to ignore.

The young animal's brain is only able to do this easily for a short period of time, and for all dog breeds (including greyhounds) this is mainly between 3 and 20 weeks of age.

After this time, the pup relies on its learned behavioural patterns to respond to changes in the environment, and this happens throughout the rest of its life.

If there is no learned behaviour suitable for something new, they will use the behaviour that is closest, which may or may not be a fear response. This is a key survival mechanism.

Wouldn't a fearful dog run faster?

No. There is a lot of evidence in brain studies that shows the parts of the brain that are used when a dog is engaged in chasing or prey drive are not the parts of the brain it uses when it is fearful.

In fact, when fear responses are triggered, many other parts of the brain can be inhibited or blocked as a survival mechanism.

What are the signs that my greyhound is struggling to behave appropriately in a new type of situation?

Greyhounds without an appropriate learned behavioural response to a situation can appear nervous, distracted, or unable to settle.

If there are too many stimuli, the greyhound may become overwhelmed and start doing odd things like constantly drinking or licking, persistently barking or howling, pacing, weaving, spinning, bopping up and down, lip quivering, or chewing on wire, bedding or bowls. Some people call these greyhounds "unsocialised".

How should I help my greyhound if it's showing these signs?

While the best time to establish appropriate learned behaviours in your greyhound is early in its life, it is not impossible to create new behavioural patterns later in life or change behaviours that are already there. It is just much more difficult and requires time and patience.

In this situation, you should start to slowly expose your greyhound to a range of different stimuli (things in the environment) in a positive way. This will allow them to gradually adjust their behaviours and reactions to stimuli they should not fear, and the sorts of stimuli they want to seek out (for food or fun), and the sorts of stimuli to ignore - a bit like you would ignore a tree in the background.

What sort of things should my greyhound get used to?

Basically, your greyhound should get used to anything that they are likely to come across in their life that should not hurt them. Below is a list of a few things that greyhounds are faced with on race day:

- smells: other dogs, food, people, vehicles etc;
- noises: loud or strange noises, radio, loudspeaker etc;
- surfaces: the feel of different surfaces such as carpet, sand, concrete, bitumen, metal and rubber;
- motion of a car or trailer;
- crowds of people and other greyhounds;
- movement of banners and flags;
- being examined and handled by multiple strangers;
- confinement to small race day kennels and starting boxes;
- standing on heights such as a vet examination table;
- catching pens.

It is important that these things are viewed positively or at the very least ignored by the greyhound, to prevent it becoming fearful on race day.

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Industry Practice Guide 12.0

What can I do at home to help educate and socialise a young greyhound for its future career?

There are many things breeders, whelpers and rearers can do in a pup's home environment to help it establish appropriate behavioural responses for its future racing career and rehoming afterwards.

The basic rule of thumb is to try and create experiences for the pup at home that will be similar to those it will have on race day.

Here are some simple ideas that won't cost a lot or require lots of your time:

- place old starting boxes into rearing pens, and feed the pup there sometimes;
- build a ramp that looks like a vet examination table in the rearing pen and place bones, food or other enrichment items on it, to encourage the pup to walk up and onto the ramp and be comfortable standing there;
- tie flags to the fences allowing them to flap in the wind;
- provide old children's toys and other strange objects in their pen for puppies to explore, and change these regularly;
- play the radio to give them experience with different sounds;
- let the pups spend a short amount of time in a race kennel each week – even together as a litter and give them food or a bone to make it fun;
- where possible, take pups for a walk at the local shops to meet other dogs and be exposed to large groups of people and noise;
- where possible, introduce pups to a variety of mature small, medium and large dogs in a relaxed setting – these mature dogs will help the pup learn appropriate behaviours for social interactions; and
- try taking the pups for a drive.



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