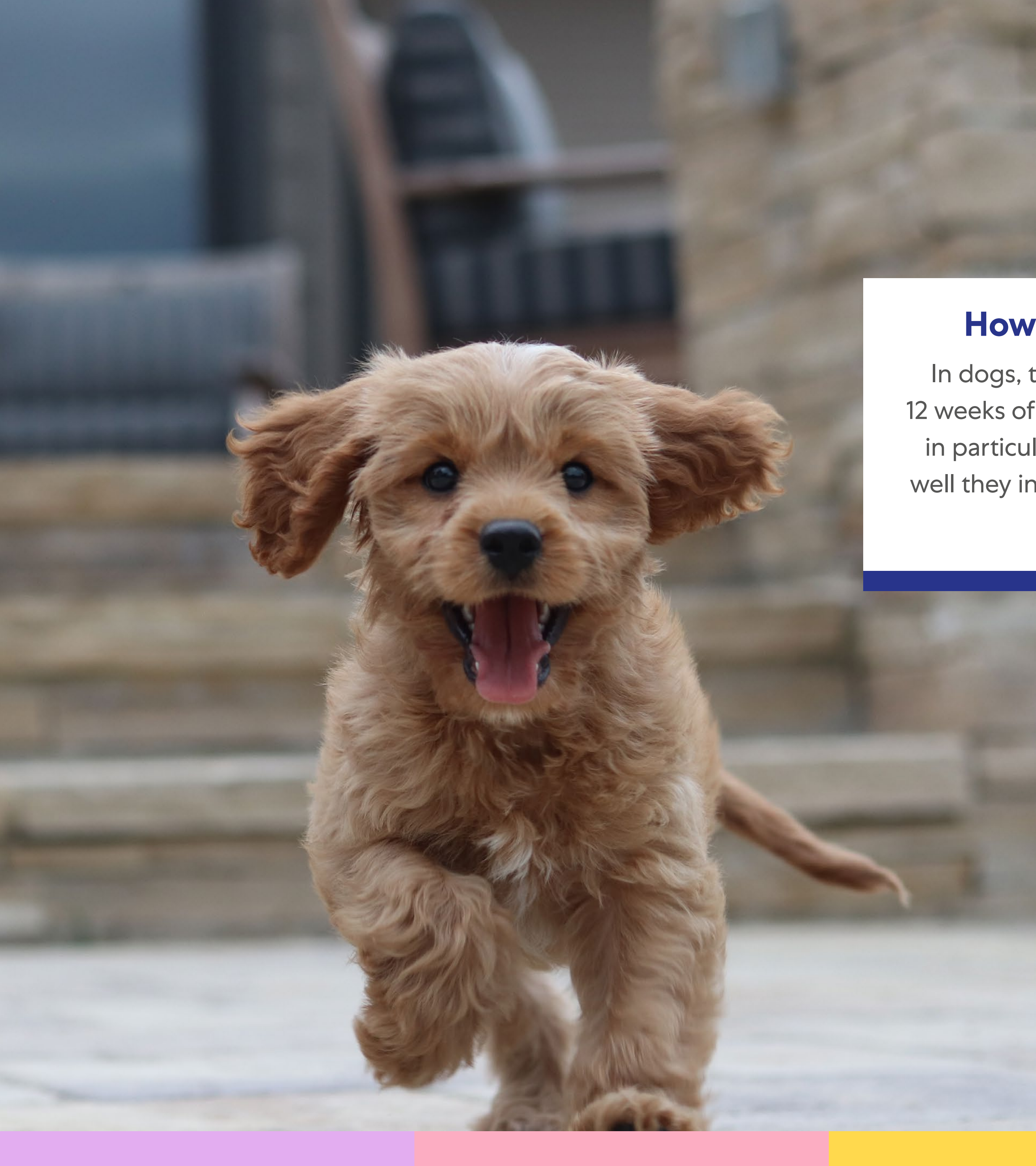


Dog Socialisation

The importance of the sensitive period

The first few months of life are particularly important for socialisation. There is a distinct phase that represents a 'sensitive period' during which time puppies are best suited to learning to enjoy the company of people, other animals and new experiences. You might also have heard of this referred to as the 'socialisation window'.





How long is the sensitive period or socialisation window?


In dogs, the sensitive period commences during the third week and lasts until around 12 weeks of age. The quantity and quality of socialisation that occur during this age range, in particular, are likely to have long-term effects on adult behaviour and influence how well they interact with others and cope with new experiences. (See [Individuality](#) for more information about the effects of the sensitive period.)

Providing positive socialisation experiences during this significant developmental window plays an important role in your dog's future and emotional wellbeing, by setting them up to be a well-adjusted adult. Breeders have a responsibility to provide their puppies with these experiences before they go to their new homes.

The Puppy Stage

Early interactions with their mother are vitally important for teaching social behaviours and may even impact a puppy's future interactions with people.¹ Sourcing your pup through a reputable breeder or establishment helps to prevent developmental (and health) issues arising later in life. Spending early life in commercial breeding facilities and pet stores is known to be associated with later aggression and other undesirable behaviors.² (See [Individuality](#))

But the developmental period for puppies doesn't stop there, and socialisation must continue throughout their life. Between weeks six and twelve, puppies are most open to establishing new bonds with other species and being exposed to new social experiences. After twelve to fourteen weeks of age, dogs tend to view new experiences with more suspicion, although most continue to be neophilic and like to explore new things. During this time you shouldn't stop socialising your puppy. As long as they do not appear to be distressed, they should continue to be exposed to a wide range of places, people, and objects in a positive manner.



It is important that puppies are not rehomed before they reach eight weeks of age

¹Santos, NR, Beck, A, & Fontbonne, A, 2019, A review of maternal behaviour in dogs and potential areas for further research, JSAP, doi.org/10.1111/jsap.13085, Accessed 31 December 2021

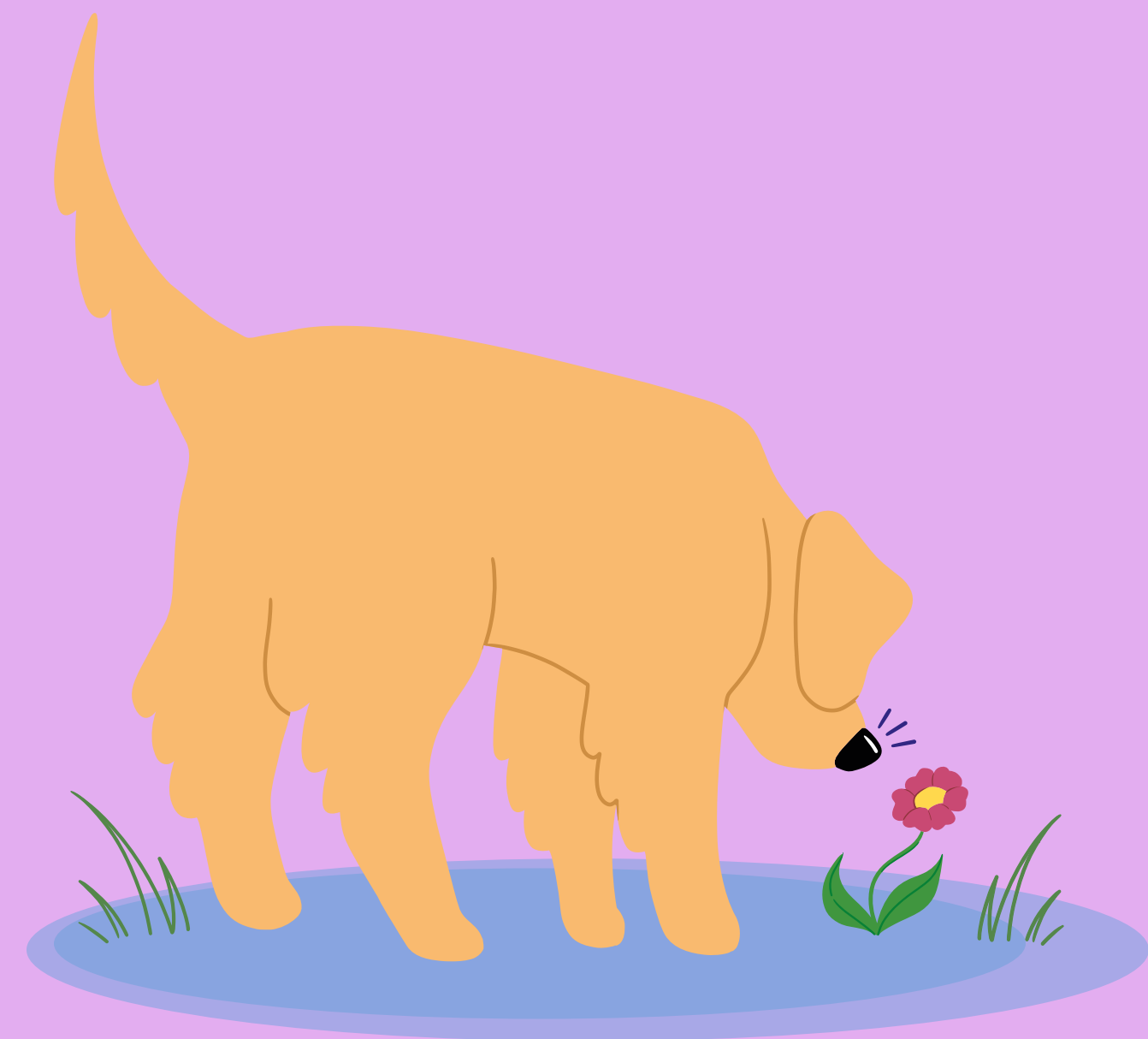
²McMillan, FD, (2017) Behavioral and psychological outcomes for dogs sold as puppies through pet stores and/or born in commercial breeding establishments: Current knowledge and putative causes, Journal of Veterinary Behavior, Volume 19, Pages 14-26, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jveb.2017.01.001>.



What about adopting an older dog?

When considering adopting a dog that has passed the sensitive period, enquire about the dog's recent socialisation experiences and their reactions. As their personality traits are more established this can help you make an informed decision as to whether this dog will be a good fit for you and your family. Many organisations provide foster care or trial periods where you have the opportunity to learn more about prospective new four-legged family members.

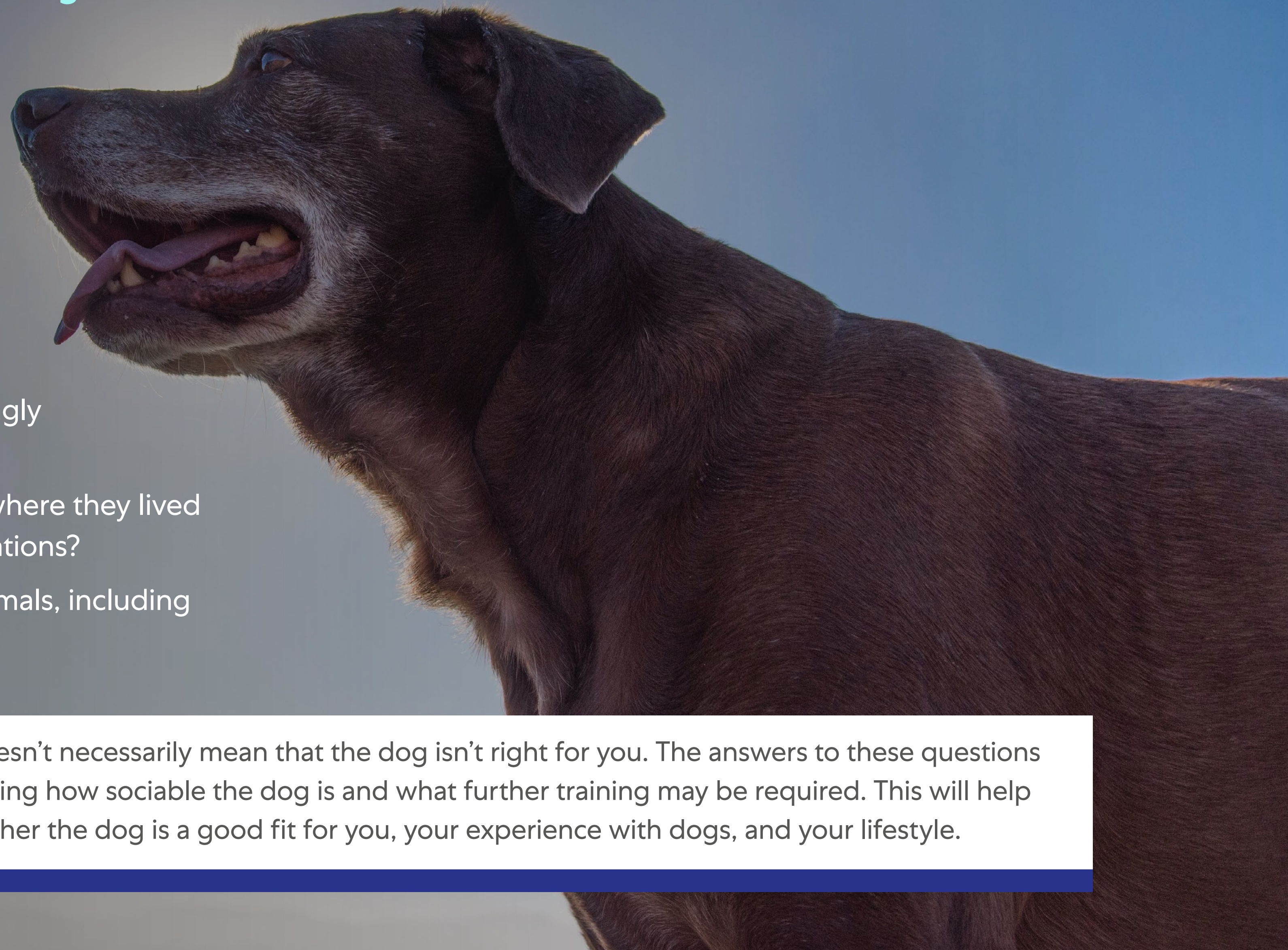
One of the benefits of an older dog is that their personality and any behaviour traits are better established and any issues may be clearer than a puppy's



Questions to ask when adopting an older dog include:

- Has the dog interacted with adults of both sexes, children and adolescents, as well as other animals? If so, do they behave in an appropriate manner?
- Have they lived in a home where they have been exposed to normal household sounds, such as a washing machine, vacuum cleaner and television? Do they have any fears related to these types of objects, or do they react strongly to fireworks and/or thunderstorms?
- Is there information on how they were raised, where they lived previously and how they behave in certain situations?
- Has the dog interacted with other pets and animals, including other dogs? How do they react?

If the answer to any of these is 'no', it doesn't necessarily mean that the dog isn't right for you. The answers to these questions will provide you with information regarding how sociable the dog is and what further training may be required. This will help you make an informed decision on whether the dog is a good fit for you, your experience with dogs, and your lifestyle.



Socialisation with people

Dogs can form close bonds with other dogs and other species, including humans. In fact, dogs have been sharing our lives and providing us with companionship for at least 15,000 years.³

It's important to recognise that the human-dog relationship is constantly changing. In the past, dogs were primarily bred to undertake specific tasks to assist people, such as herding livestock, guarding property, pulling carts, and helping us hunt for food. Today, their role is usually one of a companion and family pet.



³Larson, G, Karlsson, EK, Perri, A, et al., 2012, Rethinking dog domestication by integrating genetics, archaeology and biogeography, PNAS, Vol 109(23), pp. 8878-8883



To get the most out of their relationships with people, dogs need to learn how to interact with us – just as we do with them!

The attachment bond

This special relationship has likely evolved through living in close proximity and/or purposely breeding dogs that are sociable with people. Just as we benefit from the company of dogs, they need companionship to be happy.

In general, human relationships are considered beneficial for a dog's emotional wellbeing and may be even more important than that of other animals.⁴

In fact, the attachment bonds that dogs form with their owners closely resemble those that human infants form with their mothers.⁵



⁴Tuber, DS, Sanders, S, Hennessy, MB, & Miller, JA, 1996, Behavioral and Glucocorticoid Responses of Adult Domestic Dogs (Canis familiaris) to Companionship and Social Separation, Journal of Comparative Psychology, Vol 110(1), pp.103-108

⁵Solomon, J, et al., 2019, Attachment and Human Development, 21, 389-417.

Consider socialising your dog with all different sorts of people, including those of varying:

- **Physical appearance** – height, build, skin colour, etc
- **Gender**
- **Age** – adult, children, the elderly
- **Clothing styles** – hoods, caps, boots, face masks, high-visibility or reflective jackets
- **Voice** – deep, high-pitched, loud, calm
- **Body language and movement** – fast, jerky, energetic, quiet, slow
- **Physical abilities** – including those who use walking sticks, wheelchairs and other accessories and devices



Building positive relationships

Spending quality time together and sharing positive socialisation experiences can help you strengthen the bond with your dog, and can enhance physical, mental and emotional wellbeing for you both.

Here are some ways you can help support building positive relationships between you, your dog and other people they interact with:

- **Physical contact.** Grooming and stroking your dog is a mutually beneficial activity that helps both dogs and people feel relaxed and secure. Studies have even shown that oxytocin levels (a hormone linked to positive emotional states) increase for both humans and dogs when engaging in this type of interaction.⁶ Remember to keep in mind, however, that everyone interacting with your dog should respect your dog's preferences. For example, your dog may not like being stroked in a certain way (see [Individuality](#)) and should always be given the option to leave the interaction for some 'alone time', or time with another person or pet
- **Clear communication.** Giving clear and consistent instructions with your voice and body language, whilst readily reinforcing desirable behaviour and respecting your dog's needs are key for a positive human-dog relationship
- **Treats and rewards.** Rewarding your dog is a way of showing affection and teaching new behaviours, can be mentally stimulating and emotionally satisfying for both dogs and people alike (See [Nutrition](#))
- **Training.** Structured training provides mental stimulation and can help to reduce boredom and frustration, which is crucial for your dog's emotional wellbeing. It can be a good way to introduce your dog to new people in a controlled situation if you equip them with appropriate instructions and rewards
- **Varied and ongoing social meetings.** Positive and varied social experiences such as taking your pet to work, walking them in different environments (crowds, country, city), travelling in the car or visiting dog-friendly businesses (pubs, hotels, cafés) helps to ensure they continue to feel confident in lots of different places and with a range of people. Though this can be an excellent source of mental stimulation, you must always be guided by what your dog is comfortable with

Tips for creating a pet-friendly workplace (and its benefits) can be found [here](#).

⁶Marshall-Pescini, S, Franka, SS, Gaugg A, et al., 2019, The Role of Oxytocin in the Dog-Owner Relationship, Animals (Basel), Vol 9 (10): 792



Interactions with children

Irrespective of whether there are children in your household, it is likely your dog will encounter children over their lifetime. Positive socialisation with children of all ages should therefore be considered essential. This is critical to help reduce fear and anxiety when interacting with children, and to improve your dog's emotional wellbeing long term, as well as to ensure that children are kept safe around your dog.

Children naturally behave differently from adults and may make rapid, unpredictable movements or high-pitched vocalisations like squealing. This can elicit fear in some dogs and predatory behaviour in others. Dogs that are calm, confident and behave appropriately when interacting with children are also unlikely to be neglected or rehomed due to incompatibility with a family's lifestyle.

**Positive socialisation
with children of
all ages should be
considered essential**

Children and dogs living together

If dogs are misunderstood, inadequately socialised, or inappropriately supervised around children the consequences can be dire. Sadly, children are injured by dog bites each year, resulting in both physical and psychological trauma and even death in rare cases.

These negative interactions most commonly occur in the family home with the family dog,⁷ and are often blamed primarily on the dog. However, it is the owner's responsibility to ensure that their dogs and children are always closely supervised and that dogs receive ongoing positive socialisation experiences with children to help establish a bond based on mutual trust and understanding. Most dogs do not bite without giving warning signals that they are feeling threatened, fearful or anxious (see [Introduction](#)).

Unfortunately most children are bad at interpreting dog behaviour and so are likely to continue even if the dog warns them.⁸

It's also worth noting that some dogs just aren't compatible living with children and need an alternative home environment

⁷Jakeman, M, Oxley JA, Owczarczak-Garstecka, SC, & Westgarth, W, 2020, Pet dog bites in children: management and prevention, *BMJ Paediatrics Open*, 4:e000726,doi:10.1136/bmjpo-2020-000726, Accessed: 07 February 2022

⁸Nelly, N. Lakestani, Morag, L, Donaldson & Natalie Waran (2014) Interpretation of Dog Behavior by Children and Young Adults, *Anthrozoös*,27:1,65-80,DOI:10.2752/175303714X13837396326413



Tips for improving relationships between children and dogs:

- **Learn your dog's body language.** Do not force your dog to approach children if they are anxious or frightened of them. Equally, if they exhibit signs of stress, remove your dog from the situation or ask the child to move away
- **Respect your dog's boundaries.** If your dog wants to avoid being around a child, respect this and do not force interactions
- **Provide refuge.** Make sure that your dog has a safe place to escape the chaos that comes with living with children or having them visit. Tell children never to disturb the dog when it is in its refuge or bed
- **Reward positive interaction.** Offer treats and extra attention to your dog when interacting quietly with children to help make the association pleasant and reward calm behaviour
- **Know your dog.** Understand that some dogs might never be able to be trusted with children or enjoy being around them
- **Introduce when they're ready.** Separate and/or supervise children with dogs until the children are old enough to be empathetic and interact appropriately with them

Teaching children about dogs:

- **Approach with caution.** Teach children not to approach an unfamiliar dog, stare directly at dogs, or try to hug or kiss them. Before interacting with any dog, including their own, children should be mindful of how they approach. When it is an unfamiliar dog, they should always ask permission from a responsible adult first, preferably a parent or guardian, along with the dog's caregiver
- **Education about body language.** As children mature, teach them to recognise body language that denotes fear, stress, or aggression so they may avoid these dogs
- **Establish ground rules.** Children should be taught to leave dogs alone that are eating, sleeping, or resting in their own bed, crate, or shelter. You can also confine the dog when children are eating so they don't learn to lick or steal food from them
- **Supervised learning.** When children are old enough to follow basic directions, get them involved in undertaking basic dog training, always under supervision



Some examples of normal canine play behaviours include:

- Gently biting each other's ears and mouths (play-biting)
- Presenting their tummy/rolling over
- Sniffing each other's bottoms
- Play bowing and bouncing, to get the other to play or run
- Running and playing together with toys or sticks
- Reciprocal play where each dog takes it in turns to chase or be chased, play-bite or be bitten
- Both dogs taking short breaks from play before reinitiating the game

Understanding dog-dog interactions and doggy play

By understanding normal doggy play and interaction, you can better interpret your dog's body language and intervene if they are showing signs of feeling anxious, fearful or becoming overexcited in a social situation.

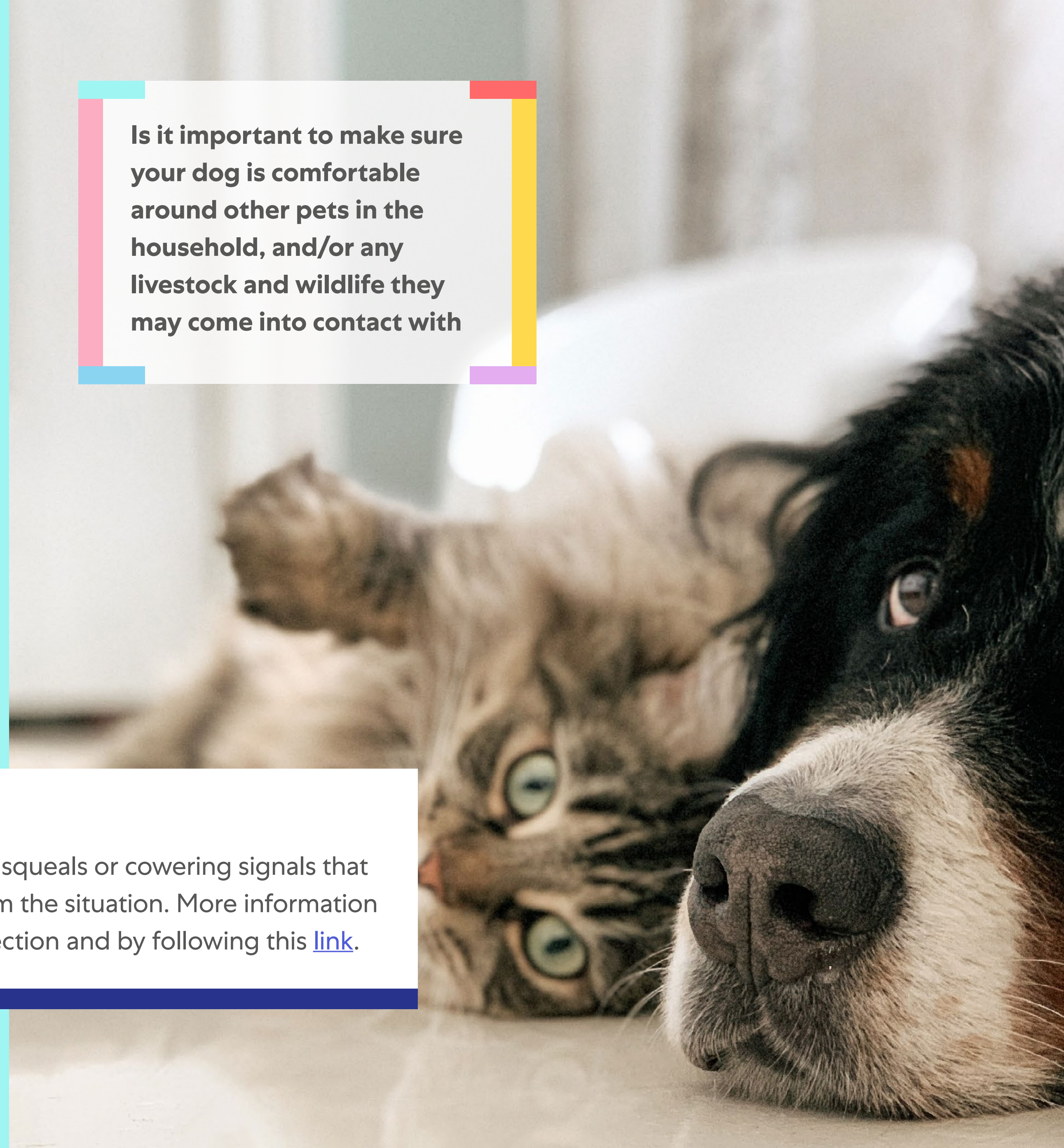
Socialisation with household pets and other animals

As part of a well-rounded socialisation programme, dogs should be exposed to other pets and animals from puppyhood and beyond, especially if they live with or are likely to interact regularly with other species. This will ensure they feel relaxed in these situations throughout their life, potentially expanding the range of places you feel comfortable taking them and the amount of freedom you give them in those environments. For example, being able to interact calmly with, or be behaviourally confident around, other animals may dictate whether you feel happy to have your dog off lead. This will also help enable exposure to a variety of socialisation experiences.

When should you intervene?

One dog constantly chasing or jumping on the other, stiff body language, squeals or cowering signals that the interaction should be stopped and the dogs restrained or removed from the situation. More information on reading your dog's body language can be found in our Introduction section and by following this [link](#).

Is it important to make sure your dog is comfortable around other pets in the household, and/or any livestock and wildlife they may come into contact with





Your dog's emotional wellbeing

Dogs living in multi-pet households should be introduced to other pets in a carefully supervised manner until a relationship is established. Owners should also ensure both species' unique needs are met. For instance, by providing elevated areas for cats to retreat to, as well as separate feeding and sleeping areas for all pets.

All of these factors are crucial for your dog's physical health and mental stimulation, which both contribute to overall emotional wellbeing – both directly and indirectly. For example, if your dog displays predatory behaviour towards livestock, you might not be inclined to take them for a walk in National Parks or footpaths around local farmland. Dogs that are well socialised with other animals, on the other hand, are more likely to participate happily in a variety of activities with their owner, strengthening the dog-animal bond and increasing emotional wellbeing.

Desensitising your dog

When introducing your dog to new animals such as horses or other livestock, start from a distance and praise and reward a calm response. Over many sessions and as long as you are still getting a positive, calm response, you can gradually move closer. The idea is to desensitise your dog through gradual exposure, building up a positive emotional response in the presence of the other animal.

As with all socialisation experiences, the key is to be purposeful, positive and give lots of praise for the right behaviour. It's also important to remember that exposure to these experiences should continue throughout your dog's life.

Learn more about socialisation and emotional wellbeing for your pets at [shine.waltham.com](https://www.shine.waltham.com)

