

Making Your Dane Adaptable

Or How to Prevent Mommy-itis

By Georgia Hymmen

Anyone who has dealt with other people's dogs is very familiar with these two scenarios:

Scenario #1

The Dane who is friendly, well-socialized, outgoing and has a stable temperament; he's a pleasure to be around. Perhaps his owner-handler has decided to see how he does with a professional on the end of the lead at the next show. No one expects any problems, because this dog *is* socialized, has a nice temperament and is ring-experienced. However, the trouble starts as soon as the handler takes the lead and attempts to leave the owner; the dog immediately becomes anxious. As the owner departs (or the handler, with dog in tow, attempts in vain to leave the owner) the dog strains and pulls at the end of the leash, trying to get back to his owner. He continually flips around, cries and whines, and can ONLY face in the direction the owner departed in. The dog is nearly impossible to show, as now he is frantic and stressed because he's been separated from the owner. He can't move in a straight line because he was too busy trying to locate where "mommy" went. Coming out of the ring, he charges back to the owner, who then pets him and makes a big deal about his return to her. The handler is frustrated because the dog behaved poorly and the owner is upset because her dog was bad *and* she just wasted a chunk of change on a professional handler for no reason.

Scenario #2

Next we have the companion dog. He's never seen a show ring, and probably never will. He's a much-loved companion and is ALWAYS with his owner. Everywhere. All the time. Never left alone for more than a very short while and certainly never crated. When the owner got his dog, he was certain that where ever he went, the dog would go. After all, dogs are a commitment and a part of the family. Owner and dog enjoy long walks and romps in the dog park. When the owner works in his home office, the dog sleeps under his desk. Now, suddenly there is a family emergency and the owner must leave and have the dog boarded. The dog is so anxious and stressed during boarding, the kennel owner is worried about the dog's health.

What do these dogs have in common? They are owned by people who love them and have worked at properly socializing their dog. Both dogs are very good around people, dogs and situations—as long as they are with their owner. However, both owners have omitted an important part of socialization—how to teach the dog to be adaptable in different situations

and with different people *without their owner present*. This lack of, as I call it, “adaptability training” is either omitted because the owner never thought of it, or is simply because the owner is too over-protective. And now they have a dog that becomes anxious when separated from them—mommy-itis as we call it!

Teaching a dog to be comfortable and confident in situations without its owner is just as important as socialization and should be included as part of puppy training. In fact, it should be considered mandatory training for the dogs’ health; as we all know, a stressed Dane can be prone to bloat. An anxious Dane may injure himself trying to escape from a caregiver. Much of the stress and anxiety that comes from being parted from their owner can be prevented with some simple additions to puppy training and socialization.

First, while structure is a very good thing in puppy training, the owner needs to “mix it up” a bit after the puppy becomes acclimated into the new home and good progress is being made with housebreaking. If everything is always the same in the puppy’s routine, then as the dog grows older, that’s how it should be in his mind and he will be much less accepting to anything different. These simple steps can be done from the point the puppy comes home to about four months of age. Remember, these are things to do *in addition* to regular socialization and during each exercise make sure there is positive reinforcement both in the form of verbal praise and treats.

- Move the crate into different locations in the house; including areas that might not be occupied as much as other places. (Always make the crate a pleasant experience, having special toys or treats the puppy can have only when in the crate).
- If you have access to different types of crates (such as Vari-Kennels and wire crates) change them back and forth.
- Have different activities happen around the crate; sometimes noisy stuff happening, others times quiet.
- Gently (very gently) move the crate while the puppy is in it.
- When guests come to the house, have them put a leash on the puppy and take him out of the crate without the owner being present. At this point, all they have to do is take the puppy out, then put him back.
- As the puppy becomes more confident of having a stranger attach his leash and take him out of the crate, step it up; have the person walk the puppy around the house, then in the yard, then perhaps a short walk around the neighborhood.

When the puppy is about four months old add these few steps:

- At Puppy Kindergarten or handling class, have a stranger take the lead and move a few feet away from the owner. The owner must **NOT** fuss over the puppy or make a big deal

of him leaving. If anything a simple, quiet “Go” command is enough. At this point, the stranger only goes a few feet away, stays away a few seconds, and returns to the owner. Upon return, the owner must (again!) **NOT** make a big deal. If the puppy jumps up or acts anxious, the owner must simply ignore the puppy until he settles. This exercise is repeated numerous times at each class, gradually getting further away from the owner and for longer times. Eventually, the owner will be out of sight during this. Soon, the puppy learns the new person is not going to take him away from his person, but will give him treats and praise.

- Have the puppy do sleepover. This is a very important part of adaptability training and should be done at different places. It might be at a boarding facility that you trust, a friend’s house, or with the breeder. You only have to drop the dog off in the evening, have him stay overnight, and get him in the morning. Again, you need to “mix it up” so he will feel comfortable no matter where he is. As time goes on, have him do one or two sleepovers every four-to-six weeks. In the long run, this will really pay off. Even if you think you will never have to leave your dog, this is important. Things happen and you never know when your dog might need to be cared for by a stranger.

At about five-to-six months, if the puppy is destined for the show ring, you might discuss with your handler about sending the puppy to “puppy camp” prior to entering a “real” show. Many handlers offer this, and it simply allows the puppy to become familiar with the handler, their facilities, assistants, vehicles and all the other things that go into being a show dog. The handler may also be able to work with stacking and gaiting the dog. If the puppy is going to be a companion, sending him off to visit a trusted dog friend for a few days will accomplish the same thing.

For the show puppy, by the time he’s ready for the ring, he will have learned he can go with introduced strangers, be comfortable sleeping and eating in new surroundings, and his first show experience will be much more positive for both him and the handler. For the companion puppy, the owner knows the puppy can handle being with other people and not freak out. People who have to handle that puppy—veterinarians and their staff, groomers and such—will appreciate this.

Two of the biggest reasons adaptability training doesn’t happen are over-protective owners and reinforcement of negative behavior. The puppy owner feels the baby needs to be protected and coddled and certainly wouldn’t survive without his human mommy to take care of him. This reluctance prevents the owner from “letting go” and starting this training when very young. And, as with any dog training, we all know the earlier you start, the easier it will be down the road! The owner sets all sorts of restrictions on the puppy “Oh he’s too young to do

this or that” when actually, he isn’t. When the puppy is given the chance to go with someone else and is perhaps a bit anxious, the owner reinforces that by using a coddling “it’s ok” tone of voice—basically telling the puppy it’s ok to be anxious.

In closing, a few extra steps in the puppy socialization process will help your Dane become a well-socialized and adaptable dog that will be able to handle anything that life might bring.

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Daynakin Great Danes

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