

Dog About Town

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Sniffing around in the woods and frolicking in streams is canine heaven, but dogs can live fulfilled lives in cities and towns – provided they are socialised and trained for the urban life...

On the whole, it's tempting to think about the quintessential British dog out enjoying the beautiful UK countryside, with green-wellied owner in tow. Of course, many of our dogs do live the perfect country life, effectively 'hunting, shooting and fishing' (aka, sniffing for squirrels, running in the woods and wallowing in muddy puddles). However, at least as many live in towns or cities, and it's time that their needs were considered too.

Living in a town or city can be a challenge for humans, let alone dogs. The sheer proximity of other people, other dogs, close neighbours and a lack of space can increase stress and pressure for both species, and this can lead to tensions between dog owners and non-dog owners in the same community.

Sadly, the presence of a small but dangerous minority who use their dogs to boost their own sense of control or domination can also form images of dogs in cities as being threatening, and recent restrictions such as those imposed in Dublin have highlighted some of these issues.

Dogs in towns and cities can live perfectly happily – indeed, there are even some advantages in terms of socialisation opportunities, but they do need to be socialised and trained with the urban environment in mind.

Street baby

If you live in a town or city and have recently got a puppy, there's not a minute to waste. While walking in a concrete jungle may not be as soothing as a stroll in the country, the need to get your puppy out and about and to expose him or her to every possible sight, sound, smell and touch that he is going to need to cope with is paramount. Just think about how the world must appear to your puppy. The streets are not paved with gold, but litter, feet and the oncoming wheels of pushchairs. Your puppy is likely to have to deal with aspects of life that a country dog may never experience. Just think about the chances that he will need to ride in a lift, go on a bus or train, or be walked next to schools or places where groups of children will be congregated. Building work, street repairs and air brakes are all on your puppy's exposure check list – because missing out on seeing these things now will mean potential stress, anxiety and fear later on.

Dogs everywhere need to meet and mix with their own kind, of course, but dogs living in urban environments have a particular need to be able to socialise in a friendly way with other dogs in relatively enclosed spaces. Town dwellers often don't have the luxury of wide open spaces and smaller outdoor areas can increase the risks of heightened tensions between dogs meeting for the first time and of pressure on existing social relationships. On a recent visit to see a friend living in central London, we went for a walk to his local park – taking his sociable but somewhat 'selectively deaf' Boxer-cross with us. The 'park' turned out to be a disused tennis court – with very little in the environment apart from concrete and weeds. The area was fully fenced, and contained probably a dozen dogs of all breeds and ages – some on lead and some off, as well as a few teenagers playing football. As we entered the park, a group of dogs immediately broke away from their playing and sniffing where their owners stood talking and ran towards

us, posturing and vocalising. From my point of view, even the most friendly and relaxed dog would find this intimidating! My friend's Boxer-cross though took this pretty much in his stride, and despite being 'hassled' by a couple of the more persistent males, he was soon off-lead and sniffing and greeting amongst them. To be honest, I was seriously impressed by how well all the dogs coped with this situation which could easily have provoked defensive or aggressive behaviour. Respect!

With this in mind, it can be viewed that there are some major advantages with raising and living with your dog in an urban environment – providing you put in all the possible socialisation and training strategies that will make your lives easier. Basics - such as house training - can seem daunting if you live in a flat or an apartment with no garden, but just think of all the socialisation opportunities that your puppy will have by being taken out every couple of hours. This may take more effort from you, but will inevitably mean that he will meet far more people and will experience far more of the world around him than a pup which is simply let out into the back garden when he needs to go to the loo.

The pressures of city living can often impact on dog owners in ways that country-dwellers never have to consider. Leaving your dog home alone can be hugely problematic if you have close neighbours that not only complain when your dog makes a noise, but may actually cause him to bark when they move around and create noise of their own. Teaching your dog to cope with being left, and particularly, teaching him to simply ignore sounds that might come through the walls, floor or ceiling, is imperative if you live cheek by jowl with other people, and their pets too.

Social scene

Despite the specific needs and pressures of city living, keeping a dog in an urban environment can be wonderfully positive for many people. Ironically, towns and cities can be somewhat isolating, and if you have never said more than hello to your neighbours, you will quickly find that having a dog with you changes everything. Being forced to take your dog out and about will mean that you get out and about too, and learning to combine your social life with giving your dog what he needs in terms of mental and physical exercise may well pay off for you both!

City Dog, by Sarah Whitehead, published by Hamlyn, is available from Amazon and other good retailers.