

# 1 in 4 UK puppies may be being acquired before minimum recommended age

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One in four puppies in the UK may be being acquired before the recommended minimum age—a figure that is considerably higher than what has been reported before—suggests research published in the latest

edition of *Vet Record*.

Separating a puppy from its mother too early may have long-term consequences on physiological and behavioural development that risks behavioural problems later in life, a major reason why dogs are given up or left in shelters, warns the author of a linked comment.

In the UK many welfare and veterinary organisations, such as the Animal Welfare Foundation, Blue Cross, PDSA and the Dogs Trust, recommend that puppies shouldn't be separated from their [mothers](#) until they are at least 8 weeks (56 days) old. There are legal restrictions on selling a puppy under this age in the UK.

Their guidance also recommends that prospective buyers should view the puppy with its mother, and this has been enshrined in English law since 2018.

The researchers wanted to find out if particular factors were associated with the acquisition of puppies under the age of 8 weeks and without viewing the puppy's mother.

They drew on data for 2392 puppies collected between May 2016 and February 2019 as part of 'Generation Pup', a long term UK study of dog health, behaviour, and welfare.

The data were obtained from three questionnaires, with details around the process of acquisition completed by owners before or after they had acquired their puppy. In all, 1844 puppies were eligible for inclusion in the final analysis.

The responses showed that 1 in 4 (461) puppies had been acquired before they were 8 weeks old, a proportion that is considerably higher than what has been reported before. Around 1 in 12 (149; just over 8%)

had been acquired without viewing the puppy's mother. Just 30 (just over 1.5%) had been acquired under 8 weeks of age and without viewing the mother.

Five factors were independently associated with acquisition of an 'under age' puppy.

Owners who visited their puppy at least once before taking it home were more likely to acquire the animal before it was 8 weeks old. This might be because they couldn't bear to leave without taking the puppy home, or because they felt the puppy was old enough, suggest the researchers, by way of an explanation.

Owners who intended to use their puppy as a working dog, such as for herding animals, pest control, work in the police or military, as a search and rescue, or guard dog were also more likely to acquire their puppy before it was 8 weeks old. This might be because they wanted to start training the puppy as soon as possible, say the researchers.

The analysis also revealed that the odds of early acquisition increased in tandem with the number of dogs already in the household and if the dog was a mix of unknown breeds.

"Mixed breed puppies may be more likely to have been bred by a hobby breeder than a licensed breeder, or be a result of accidental mating," suggest the researchers. "Hobby breeders do not need to conform to the same selling restrictions as licensed breeders."

At the other end of the spectrum, the likelihood of acquiring a puppy under the recommended age fell as the level of annual household income rose.

Similarly, owners who visited their puppy before taking it home, or

bought a puppy registered with the Kennel Club, or who viewed the puppy's father and/or collected the puppy from the breeder's home, had lower odds of acquiring a puppy without viewing the mother.

The researchers suggest that prospective owners may be more aware of the recommendations to view the puppy with its mother than those around the recommended minimum age.

Their findings might help target specific owners, "with educational or media campaigns that could decrease the proportion of puppies acquired in this way in the future," they conclude.

In a linked research comment, vet Dr. Federica Pirrone, University of Milan, Italy, emphasised the importance of the guidance and regulations.

"Early separation of a puppy from its mother and littermates is a husbandry strategy that may increase the animal's chances of exhibiting potentially problematic behaviours as an adult," she warns.

"The occurrence of problematic behaviours is the most common reason why [dogs](#) are relinquished, abandoned or, in countries where it is allowed, even euthanased."

Early separation impairs early brain development which restricts the ability of puppies to adapt to new stimuli and to develop good social skills as adults. They are highly likely to exhibit fear and anxiety-related behaviours as adults, which are then often perceived by owners as problematic, she explains.

Similarly, she emphasises: "Seeing the mother before buying a puppy enables the prospective owner to ascertain that she is unstressed and free from behavioural problems, which in turn helps predict that the puppy will not develop behavioural problems later in life."

"It is, therefore, essential to encourage prospective owners to be well informed regarding dog behaviour and to be aware of the importance of correct socialisation," she says.

Daniella Dos Santos, British Veterinary Association President, commented: "There are very good reasons why puppies shouldn't leave their mother before they're eight weeks old. Rehoming from this age means [puppies](#) are fully and correctly weaned, and staying with their mother in early development plays a vital role in social and behavioural development.

"Prospective puppy buyers should always ask to view them alongside their mother first and we strongly recommend using the free Puppy Contract to make sure that they're getting a happy, healthy and well-socialised animal from a reputable breeder or rehoming centre."

**More information:** Puppy acquisition: factors associated with acquiring a puppy under eight weeks of age and without viewing the mother, *Vet Record*, [DOI: 10.1136/vr.105789](https://doi.org/10.1136/vr.105789)

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