Pandemic Pups: Investigating the Behavioural Impact of Early Socialisation Restrictions in Dogs Acquired Between 2019 and 2022

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Research Paper

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Abstract

This research project explored the longer-term behavioural effects seen in dogs that were acquired during the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically between the years 2019 and 2022. These years brought unprecedented restrictions that had a significant impact on how and when people could socialise their dogs. With puppy classes cancelled, group walks discouraged, and much of life confined to the home, many dogs missed the key window for early exposure to different people, places, sounds, and experiences. The study set out to examine whether these limitations have had an ongoing impact on dog behaviour, and to understand what types of issues owners are now seeing as their dogs mature.

The aim of this research was to identify common trends and behaviours linked to limited early-life experiences, and to gather feedback on the kind of support owners felt they needed then and now. This was achieved using an online questionnaire, shared through various social media channels and dog owner groups. The survey combined a mix of closed and open-ended questions, covering background information, behavioural concerns, early social experiences, and any training or behavioural help that had been accessed. A total of 134 responses were received, providing both quantitative and qualitative data for analysis. Basic descriptive statistics were used to evaluate the frequency of certain behaviours, while open responses were coded and grouped using thematic analysis to identify recurring issues and owner concerns.

The results showed a strong link between reduced early exposure and behaviours such as general nervousness, fear of novelty, separation-related behaviour, and reactivity to people or other dogs. A large proportion of owners also reported struggling with day-to-day challenges such as lead walking, overexcitement in new environments, and difficulty settling. While some dogs adapted well despite early limitations, the majority showed at least one area of concern that owners felt could be traced back to the pandemic period. The study also revealed that many owners lacked guidance during the early stages of their dog's development, particularly in relation to building confidence and coping skills. Some owners expressed regret about not knowing how critical that early period was, and others felt overwhelmed by the lack of professional support available at the time.

The study concludes by offering a set of recommendations based on the findings. These include increased awareness around early development and how to support dogs through missed experiences, greater access to ongoing behavioural support for adolescent and adult dogs, and practical advice for both owners and trainers working with this specific cohort of dogs. It also highlights the need for clearer messaging around the importance of early socialisation and emotional resilience in dogs, especially during periods of societal disruption. The insights gained through this project are intended to help guide future support and intervention strategies, with the goal of improving both dog and owner wellbeing in the years ahead. These findings contribute to a better understanding of how early environmental conditions can shape canine behaviour and highlight the importance of adapting support for dog owners during widespread disruptions

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Chapter One – Background

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted everyday life across the world in ways that most people could never have predicted. It brought about significant and prolonged changes to how we lived, worked and interacted. As communities adapted to lockdowns, social distancing and travel restrictions, many households turned their attention inwards. With more people spending extended periods of time at home, a sharp rise in dog ownership occurred. For some, this was a long-awaited opportunity to add a dog to the family. For others, it was a spontaneous decision driven by a need for companionship and emotional support in an otherwise uncertain and often isolating time.

Between 2019 and 2022, the demand for puppies and rescue dogs increased substantially. Across both Ireland and the UK, breeders, rehoming centres and rescue organisations reported high levels of interest and unprecedented numbers of applications. While on the surface this appeared to be a positive development for many dogs in need of homes, a new pattern has started to emerge. Trainers and behaviourists have increasingly seen dogs who are now displaying behavioural challenges, many of which appear to relate to the early experiences they did, or did not, receive during that period. The reason behind these issues may not be immediately obvious to owners, especially those who feel they provided loving homes and spent more time than usual with their new dog.

The reality is that the pandemic created a unique and restrictive environment for raising and socialising a dog. Puppy classes were postponed or cancelled. Public spaces were limited or completely inaccessible. Dogs often spent their critical early development stages seeing only their immediate household, with minimal exposure to strangers, other dogs, traffic, shops, children, or novel environments. Some owners were afraid to leave their homes at all, and even where short walks were possible, the variety and consistency of experiences was often lacking. For rescue dogs, the story was often even more complex. Many were placed quickly with limited background checks, and the opportunities for post-adoption support or structured settling-in guidance were extremely limited.

In the months and years that followed, these limitations began to manifest in behaviour. Nervousness, reactivity, excessive barking, poor coping skills, and difficulty being left alone were common themes raised in behaviour consultations. Some dogs were reported to struggle with changes in routine or exposure to unfamiliar people or environments. Others developed fear-based responses, either towards specific triggers or more generally. A number of these behaviours would usually be preventable or reduced through early positive socialisation and confidence-building exercises. However, during the pandemic, those opportunities were either restricted or entirely unavailable.

It is also worth noting that the dog training and behaviour industry itself was affected. Many trainers were unable to work in-person, and although some adapted quickly to online formats, not all owners were aware of these resources or felt confident enough to engage with them. In rural areas, where access to progressive training support is already limited, many owners were left without practical help during the most crucial stages of their dog's development. Misinformation and outdated advice also circulated more freely online during this time, often adding to confusion for new dog owners.

This study aims to explore the connection between the early-life experiences of dogs acquired during the pandemic and the behaviours they are now exhibiting. It seeks to identify what challenges owners faced during the socialisation period, which types of behaviours are most commonly being reported, and what kind of support was or was not available. The project uses a combination of structured survey data and open-ended feedback to gain a more complete picture. By gathering this information directly from dog owners, the goal is not only to understand the current situation more clearly but also to contribute to the development of better training guidance and long-term behavioural support for dogs who may have been affected by this highly unusual period in recent history.

While the study focuses specifically on dogs acquired between 2019 and 2022, it is hoped that the findings will have a broader impact. Understanding how gaps in early development can influence long-term behaviour is relevant beyond the pandemic. It offers insight into the importance of socialisation, the role of environment in behaviour shaping, and the need for early intervention and owner education. As more of these dogs mature and continue to live with their families, trainers and behaviour professionals will need to find ways to support them that take into account both the behavioural challenges and the unusual set of circumstances that contributed to their development.

Chapter Two – Literature Review

The early stages of a dog's life are widely recognised as being critical to behavioural development. Research has consistently shown that the period between three and fourteen weeks of age is when puppies are most receptive to forming positive associations with the world around them. During this time, structured exposure to people, dogs, environments, and different stimuli helps shape the way a dog copes with novelty, change and social interaction later in life. Scott and Fuller's early work on canine development outlined these key windows, and further studies have built on this understanding, emphasising the long-term value of thoughtful and well-managed socialisation during this sensitive stage.

Socialisation is not just about exposure, but about exposure that is positive and appropriate. McCune and De Mouzon (2017) highlighted that overstimulation or forced encounters during this window can lead to fear and avoidance rather than confidence. The same is true when socialisation is inconsistent or entirely absent. Dogs that are under-socialised are more likely to display signs of fear-based behaviour such as anxiety, reactivity or avoidance in adulthood. For many owners during the pandemic, this ideal window was overshadowed by government restrictions, limited access to outdoor environments, and the unavailability of formal training classes. As a result, many dogs missed critical opportunities to build positive emotional resilience.

Studies following the pandemic have begun to document the effect of these socialisation gaps. Applebaum et al. (2021) found that dogs acquired during lockdown were more likely to be described by their owners as nervous or reactive, particularly in unfamiliar environments. Owners also reported difficulty with separation and increased levels of frustration-based behaviour such as barking or destructive chewing. This aligns with what many trainers have seen on the ground — that dogs raised during this time were given love and attention, but not always the right types of learning experiences to prepare them for the wider world.

Separation anxiety has emerged as one of the most common behavioural concerns in post-pandemic dogs. Dogs who were rarely left alone during their first few months found it difficult to adapt when owners returned to work or resumed a more active lifestyle. Sherman and Mills (2008) explained that the ability to cope with absence is something that needs to be gently introduced, and when that is missed, the emotional fallout can be difficult to manage. This can result in behaviours such as vocalisation, destruction, toileting indoors and general distress, which often cause worry for owners and reduce the dog's quality of life.

Beyond individual behaviour, the social environment also plays a major role. Hall et al. (2015) noted that dogs raised in enriched environments, with frequent varied contact and interactive play, tended to display higher levels of confidence and lower stress responses. In contrast, those who experienced restricted or predictable routines, limited contact with others and fewer challenges were more cautious and easily overwhelmed. For many pandemic-era dogs, life at home was often predictable and quiet. When they were later exposed to the busy outside world, some struggled to adjust. These challenges can manifest not just in nervousness but in defensive behaviour, such as barking at people or lunging on the lead, particularly when the dog feels uncertain or unsupported.

The impact of the pandemic on owners also needs to be considered. Studies like those by Shoesmith et al. (2021) found that while many owners turned to dogs for emotional support, they also felt overwhelmed, underprepared, and sometimes guilty about their dog's behaviour. The pressure to raise a well-behaved dog without the usual support systems, paired with the emotional toll of the pandemic itself, created a challenging environment for new dog owners. This often led to inconsistent training, uncertainty about what was "normal" behaviour, and in some cases, a reluctance to seek help until issues became more significant.

In Ireland, the challenges have been slightly different from those in the UK, particularly in rural areas. Access to progressive training support is still developing, and while awareness of positive reinforcement is growing, there is still a strong presence of outdated or punitive methods. This makes early intervention more difficult, and many dogs are left without appropriate behavioural guidance during the crucial stages of their development. The situation is further complicated for rescue dogs, who may already have had a difficult start in life and who now also carry the added weight of early pandemic-era limitations.

Recent literature has started to explore how professionals can better support dogs and owners in these situations. Blackwell and Casey (2006) emphasised the value of early intervention and education, not just for preventing behavioural issues but also for building positive, long-lasting relationships between dogs and their families. The role of structured classes, individual training support, and games-based learning is increasingly being recognised as a key part of both prevention and rehabilitation.

The literature shows clearly that while early life experiences are not the only factor in shaping behaviour, they do play a significant and lasting role. For dogs acquired during 2019 to 2022, the pandemic created a unique developmental context. These dogs may not have been mistreated or neglected, but they were often underexposed to the world around them at a time when confidence and coping skills should have been built. It is this gap that this study seeks to explore, by listening to the experiences of owners and identifying the patterns and themes that may help guide future training, behaviour support, and owner education.

Chapter Three – Research Methodology

This chapter outlines the research design, methods of data collection, and approach to analysis used in this study. The aim was to explore the behavioural outcomes in dogs acquired between 2019 and 2022, with a particular focus on the impact of reduced socialisation opportunities during the COVID-19 pandemic. A mixed-methods approach was chosen to allow both quantitative and qualitative data to be gathered from dog owners. This combination of structured and open responses made it possible to identify trends while also capturing the context and depth behind owner experiences.

An online questionnaire was selected as the primary research tool. This method allowed data to be collected quickly and efficiently from a wide geographical area, and it suited the aim of reaching a broad range of dog owners who had acquired their pets during the pandemic. The survey was created using Google Forms and shared across a range of social media platforms and dog-related groups. The decision to use an online format was also influenced by its accessibility, ease of use, and ability to preserve respondent anonymity.

The questionnaire itself included a mix of closed and open-ended questions. Closed questions focused on background information such as the dog's age, breed, and acquisition date, as well as the presence of specific behaviours such as reactivity, nervousness, or separation-related issues. These questions helped to generate quantitative data that could be analysed descriptively to identify common behavioural patterns. In addition, several open-ended questions were included to allow owners to describe their dog's behaviour in their own words, share their experiences of training and support, and offer their thoughts on what might have helped them during those early stages.

Before finalising the survey, a pilot version was reviewed by a small group of dog professionals and owners to ensure clarity and relevance. Their feedback led to minor adjustments in the wording of several questions to improve understanding. The final version of the survey took approximately ten minutes to complete and was available for responses over a period of several weeks. In total, 134 valid responses were collected.

The analysis of the data followed a two-part approach. Quantitative data from closed questions was analysed using basic descriptive statistics, including frequency counts and percentages, to establish patterns in behavioural outcomes and support needs. This allowed for clear identification of the most common issues and themes emerging across the group. The qualitative data from open-ended questions was analysed using basic thematic analysis. Responses were read closely and coded for recurring ideas, such as references to anxiety, lack of confidence, or difficulties with recall or lead walking. Themes were grouped to reflect broader behavioural categories and owner experiences, and illustrative quotes were noted to support the findings.

The sample was not limited to any particular breed or training background, which allowed for a broad overview of experiences. While most participants were based in Ireland or the UK, the online format also attracted responses from further afield. The aim was not to make generalised claims across all dogs acquired during the pandemic, but to highlight shared themes and give insight into the common behavioural concerns that have emerged in recent years.

One of the strengths of this methodology is that it allowed participants to reflect on their personal experiences in their own words. This added depth to the data and helped identify gaps in early training, support and understanding. However, there were also limitations. Self-reported behaviour may be influenced by owner interpretation, and those who chose to complete the survey may have been more motivated to do so because they were experiencing difficulties. While this does not invalidate the findings, it is important to acknowledge that the responses may not reflect the experiences of all pandemic-era dog owners.

The use of an online format also meant that individuals without internet access or those less familiar with digital platforms were not included, which may have limited diversity. However, for the scope of this research, the online approach was the most practical and accessible method to reach a wide and relevant audience.

Ethical considerations were built into the process. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and respondents were informed that their answers would be used to support this research. No personal identifiers were collected, and all data has been stored securely. The use of anonymised examples in the analysis ensures that individual responses are respected and protected.

This research methodology was designed to balance breadth and depth. By combining the reach of quantitative questions with the richness of qualitative input, the study was able to generate meaningful insights into the behavioural outcomes of dogs raised during a very unusual and challenging period. The next chapter will present the findings in detail, highlighting key trends and emerging themes from the data.

Chapter Four – Data Presentation and Analysis

This chapter presents the findings from the online questionnaire completed by 134 respondents who acquired their dogs between 2019 and 2022. The purpose of the questionnaire was to gather insight into the behavioural outcomes seen in dogs raised during or shortly after the COVID-19 pandemic, with particular focus on early socialisation, confidence, and coping with real-world experiences. The data has been organised to show both statistical trends and themes that emerged from the open-ended responses.

The results are structured into several sections to allow for clearer understanding. These include basic information about the dogs themselves, the behaviours owners reported, and what kind of support or training they had access to during those early stages. Where appropriate, charts and graphs are included to visually represent the data and help show patterns more clearly. Direct quotes from participants are used throughout to bring personal context to the statistics and show the lived experiences behind the numbers.

The quantitative data has been analysed descriptively to highlight frequencies, percentages, and general trends. The qualitative responses have been reviewed using basic thematic analysis, where recurring ideas and phrases were grouped into meaningful categories. This approach gives space for both broad trends and individual stories to be explored side by side.

By presenting both types of data in this way, this chapter provides a clear picture of the experiences owners had during this time and what kinds of challenges their dogs may still be facing. The aim is not only to report the numbers but also to reflect the reality of what it has been like for owners navigating dog ownership during a very unusual and disrupted period.

Q1 – What year did you get your dog?

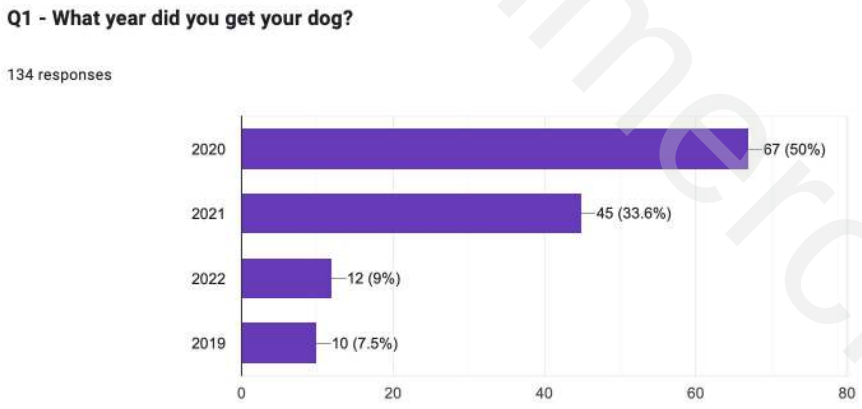
Respondents were asked to indicate the year in which they acquired their dog. This question helped confirm whether the dog fell within the scope of the study, which focused on animals acquired during or immediately following the COVID-19 pandemic, between 2019 and 2022.

Out of 134 responses, the majority of dogs were acquired in **2020**, which accounted for exactly **50 percent** of the sample (n=67). This is unsurprising given that 2020 marked the start of widespread lockdowns and lifestyle changes, during which many people sought out a dog for companionship. The next highest group was **2021**, representing **33.6 percent**(n=45). This suggests that interest in dog ownership remained high as restrictions eased, although many of the early-life challenges created by the pandemic were still present.

Smaller groups were recorded in **2022** (**9 percent**, n=12) and **2019** (**7.5 percent**, n=10). The 2019 group, although technically pre-pandemic, was included as those dogs would have experienced the early stages of socialisation during the first lockdowns in 2020. These figures confirm that the majority of the sample consists of dogs who were raised under pandemic conditions, making the data relevant to the research question and suitable for further analysis.

This distribution also provides a useful spread across the key years of interest, allowing for comparisons between dogs acquired during different phases of the pandemic.

Q1 – Supporting Chart (What year did you get your dog?)



Q2 – How old was your dog when you brought them home?

This question was used to determine the age of the dog at the point of acquisition. Understanding this gives insight into how much of the early socialisation window the dog may have experienced with their new owner, or whether that period had already passed. Age at acquisition can also influence behaviour and the type of early experiences the dog was exposed to.

The majority of respondents, **73.1 percent** (n=98), reported acquiring their dog between **8 and 12 weeks of age**. This is generally considered the most appropriate and common age for puppies to leave their mother and littermates. It also sits within the critical socialisation period, meaning these dogs would have been in a key developmental stage when introduced to their new environment. However, for those raised during the pandemic, opportunities for social contact and varied experiences were often limited, regardless of age.

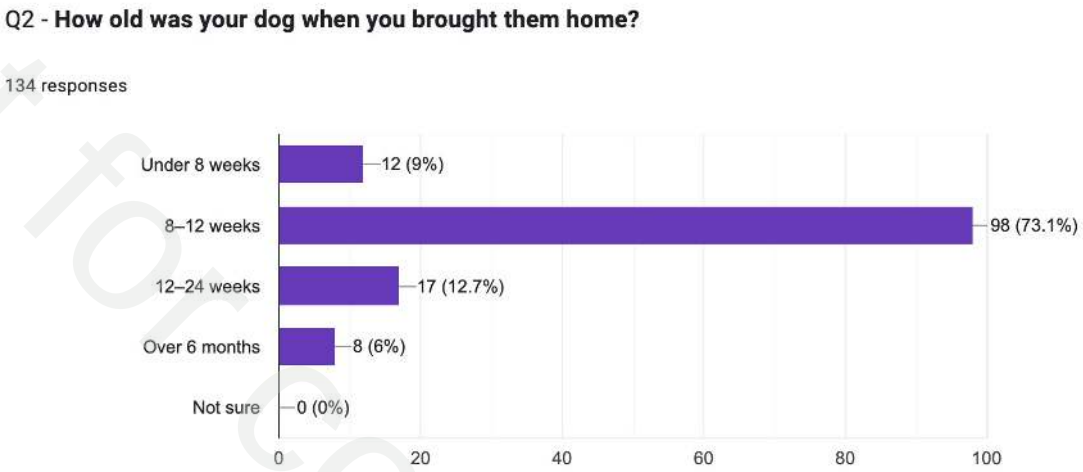
A further **12.7 percent** (n=17) brought their dogs home between **12 and 24 weeks of age**, and **6 percent** (n=8) received dogs who were already **over six months old**, which often applies to rehomed or rescue dogs. These dogs may have had limited or inconsistent early exposure and may require more time and structured support to adjust. These age brackets can have a bearing on the behaviours that develop later in life, particularly when that time overlaps with periods of lockdown or restricted movement.

Notably, **9 percent** of participants (n=12) indicated they acquired their dog **under 8 weeks of age**, which raises some concern. Current guidance suggests that puppies should remain with their mother and littermates until at least 8 weeks of age to support social development, emotional regulation, and early learning through interaction with their siblings. What is particularly concerning in this case is that the percentage of dogs brought home under 8 weeks does not align with the number of respondents in Q3 who stated that their dog was bred at home. This suggests that some puppies may have been handed over too early from breeders, sellers, or rehoming situations where the importance of this early stage was either not understood or not prioritised.

Bringing puppies home too early can have lasting consequences on behaviour, including increased sensitivity, separation-related behaviours, and difficulty interacting with other dogs. This, combined with the additional disruption of the pandemic environment, could further impact a puppy's ability to develop emotional stability and social confidence. This area may warrant further exploration and highlights the importance of educating breeders and new owners on the value of allowing pups to stay with their mother until the appropriate age.

No participants selected “Not sure,” which suggests that respondents felt confident in recalling the approximate age at which their dog came home.

Q2 – Supporting Chart (How old was your dog when you brought them home?)



Q3 – Where did your dog come from?

This question explored the source from which participants acquired their dogs. Understanding where dogs were obtained from is important, as it can often influence the type and quality of early experiences the dog was exposed to. For example, dogs from reputable breeders may have had some structured early socialisation, while those from rescue or less controlled environments may have had more limited or inconsistent early handling.

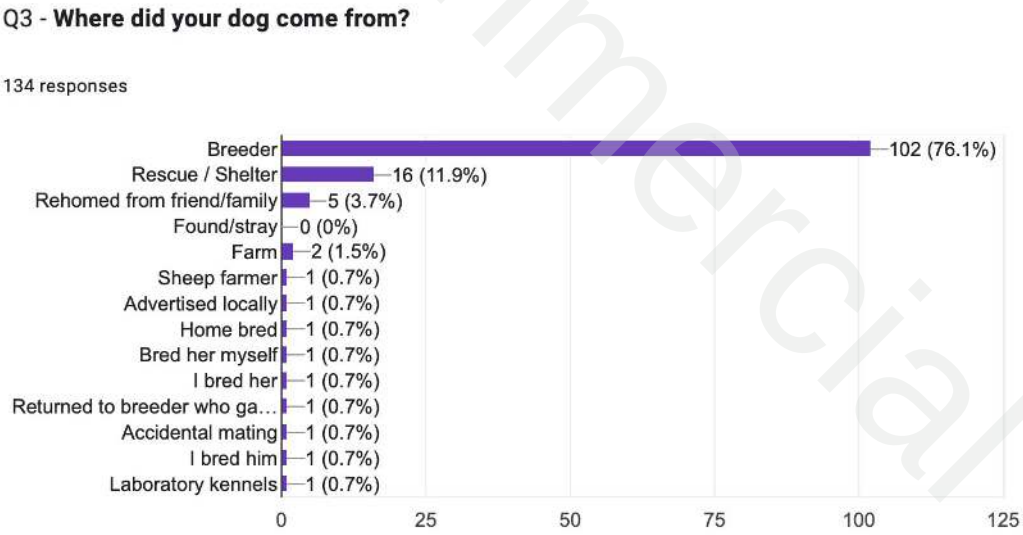
The results show that the majority of dogs, **76.1 percent** (n=102), came from a **breeder**. This may reflect the increased demand for puppies during the pandemic, when formal adoption procedures were often slowed or paused, and buying directly from breeders became the more accessible option. However, the term “breeder” is quite broad and may include a range of breeding situations, from registered and responsible breeders to more casual or less regulated setups. This makes it difficult to draw clear conclusions about the quality of care or early socialisation these dogs may have received.

11.9 percent of respondents (n=16) acquired their dog from a **rescue or shelter**, and **3.7 percent** (n=5) were rehomed from **friends or family members**. A small number of respondents acquired their dog from a **farm** (n=2), and the rest of the responses were spread across a variety of categories such as **home bred**, **advertised locally**, or **accidental mating**, each accounting for less than 1 percent of the total sample.

Notably, several responses indicated that the dog was bred by the owner or came from a dog previously bred by them. When combined, these responses still represent a very small portion of the total sample. However, they do help clarify earlier concerns raised in Q2, where **9 percent** of owners reported acquiring their dogs under 8 weeks of age. Based on the small number of participants who indicated that their dog was bred at home or by themselves, it does not fully account for those early separations. This suggests that some puppies may have been handed over too early by breeders or sellers, either due to demand or a lack of understanding about the importance of early maternal and littermate contact.

The limited number of dogs from rescue or rehoming situations also highlights that the majority of dogs in this sample were acquired with planned intent, rather than through adoption of older dogs. This is relevant to the study because dogs acquired from breeders at 8 to 12 weeks would have been entering their homes during or shortly after their key socialisation window, right at the point when many pandemic-related restrictions were still in place. As such, the data continues to build a picture of dogs whose development may have been shaped more by environmental limitations than by poor welfare before acquisition.

Q3 – Supporting Chart (How old was your dog when you brought them home?)



Q4 – What breed is your dog?

This question was included to give an overview of the breeds represented in the survey and to allow consideration of how breed traits may factor into the behaviours reported later in the study. While behaviour can be influenced by many factors, breed can play a role in energy levels, sensitivity, sociability, and the type of training support a dog may need. Understanding the spread of breeds also helps to determine whether the findings are generalisable or more heavily weighted toward specific types of dogs.

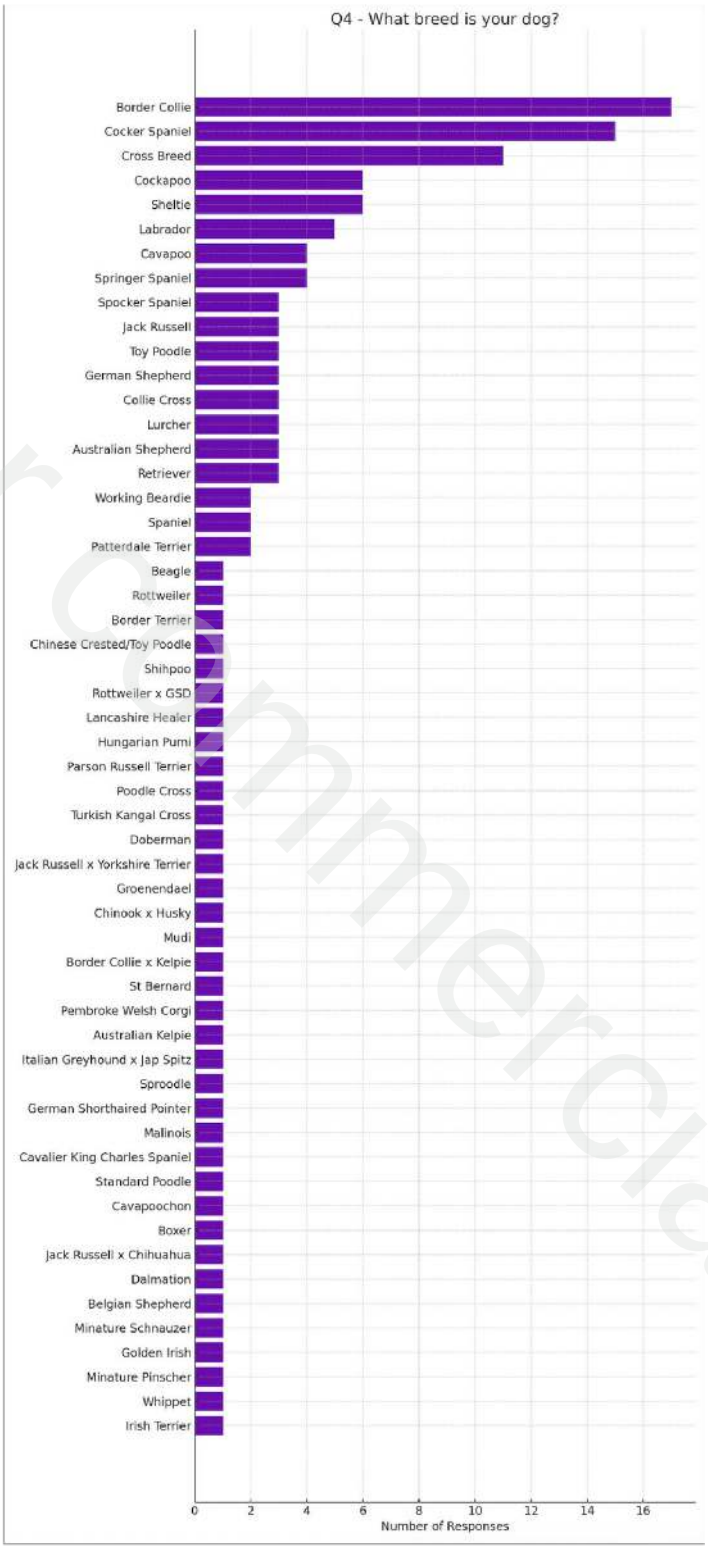
The most commonly reported breed was the **Border Collie**, which made up the largest portion of responses (**n=17**), followed closely by **Cocker Spaniels** (**n=15**), **Cross Breeds** (**n=11**), and other working-type dogs such as **Cockapoos**, **Shelties**, and **Springer Spaniels**. These breeds are often highly active and intelligent, requiring mental stimulation and consistent, structured training. Their presence in larger numbers reflects the nature of where this survey was shared, with the majority of responses coming from Facebook groups focused on dog training, agility, or obedience. These communities tend to attract owners who train and compete with high-drive breeds such as collies, spaniels, and working crosses.

It is worth noting that this leaning toward traditionally "working" breeds is likely to have influenced some of the behavioural themes seen in the later data, particularly around sensitivity, reactivity, and frustration-based behaviours. These breeds are often highly responsive, and when their needs for stimulation and direction are not met, they may develop behaviours that can be challenging for owners to manage. This adds valuable insight into the kind of support these owners were seeking during the pandemic period.

That said, the results did not focus solely on these groups. The survey also received responses for a **broad range of other breeds**, including **Labradors**, **Cavapoos**, **Boxers**, **Whippets**, **Toy Poodles**, **German Shepherds**, and several less commonly seen breeds such as the **Mudi**, **Hungarian Pumi**, and **Turkish Kangal Cross**. In total, over **50 different breeds and crosses** were represented in the data, which brings welcome balance to the sample and helps ensure the findings are not too heavily skewed towards any one group.

It was encouraging to see participation from owners of dogs across such a varied spectrum. While some patterns were more noticeable in working breeds, the inclusion of toy breeds, companion dogs, and mixed breeds gives a fuller picture of how early-life experiences during the pandemic may have affected dogs in different categories. This broader representation supports the value of the study as a useful reference across a range of household dog types.

Q4 – Supporting Chart (What breed is your dog?)



Q5 – Is your dog neutered/spayed?

This question aimed to identify whether dogs in the study were neutered or spayed at the time of data collection. While neutering is often discussed in terms of reproductive health or population control, it is also relevant in behaviour studies, as some research has explored potential links between neutering and changes in social interaction, anxiety levels and behavioural responses.

Out of 134 responses, **63.4 percent** of owners (n=85) reported that their dog had been **neutered or spayed**, while **36.6 percent** (n=49) stated that their dog had **not**. This reflects a fairly typical distribution, though it is slightly higher than average in terms of early neutering, particularly considering that a portion of the dogs in the study are likely to be under the age of two or three. This may be influenced by rescue or shelter policies, as well as individual breeder requirements or veterinary advice provided during the pandemic.

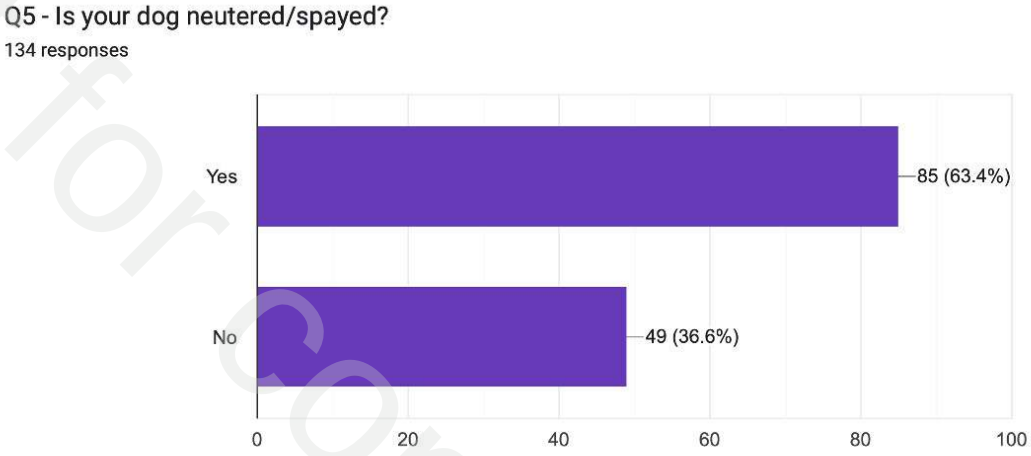
It is important to acknowledge that **the survey did not ask participants to specify the age at which their dog was neutered**, which could have been a useful data point. Several studies have explored the behavioural impact of neutering in relation to timing. For example, McGreevy et al. (2013) and Hart et al. (2014) found that neutering before full behavioural maturity could potentially increase the risk of certain issues, including fear-related behaviours and reactivity in some breeds. Other studies have noted that early neutering may interfere with hormone development that influences emotional regulation and confidence.

However, it is equally important to recognise that findings are mixed, and many of the behavioural concerns reported post-neutering can also be linked to environmental or genetic influences. That said, knowing **when** a dog was neutered, and under what circumstances, might have helped draw more meaningful links between hormonal influence and the behaviours discussed in later sections of this study. Including a question on neutering age may be something to consider for future research to help distinguish between dogs neutered early, late, or not at all.

There is also some evidence to suggest that neutered dogs may have altered responses to other dogs, particularly in social environments. In dogs where socialisation was already limited, as was the case during the COVID-19 restrictions, the impact of hormonal changes may have contributed further to tension or unease during interactions. While this study does not attempt to measure that directly, it remains an important context when reviewing behaviours such as reactivity, nervousness, or social avoidance.

Overall, this result provides a useful overview of the neutering status of the sample, but it also highlights the importance of considering **when** and **why** neutering occurred, especially in relation to behaviour. While this question was useful in understanding general patterns, its scope was limited, and further exploration into timing and context would help to support more specific behavioural conclusions in future studies.

Q5 – Supporting Chart (Is your dog neutered/spayed?)



Q6 – During the first 6 months you had your dog, how much exposure did they get to the following?

This question aimed to explore the breadth of early-life experiences that dogs in the study were exposed to. The first six months of life are considered critical in terms of social and environmental development, and positive exposure to a range of situations during this time is known to have a long-term impact on behavioural confidence, adaptability, and emotional resilience.

Participants were asked to tick all relevant exposure types that their dog experienced during their first six months in the home. The data shows a varied level of exposure across different categories, with some areas receiving notably more attention than others.

The most common type of exposure was **car travel**, selected by **89.6 percent** (n=120) of respondents. This is likely reflective of practical routines, such as travelling to outdoor spaces during lockdown periods, or vet visits. Following that, **being left alone for short periods** was reported by **73.1 percent** (n=98), which suggests that most owners recognised the need to help their dogs develop independence. However, it is worth noting that this still leaves over a quarter of dogs who may not have had any structured time alone during early development, which can contribute to separation-related behaviours later on.

Off-lead interaction with other dogs was reported by **70.9 percent** (n=95), and **on-lead dog exposure** by **65.7 percent**(n=88). While these figures are encouraging, they do not provide insight into the quality or consistency of those interactions, or whether they were positive. Still, they suggest that despite restrictions, many owners found ways to allow their dogs to see and engage with other dogs, whether during walks or organised meetups.

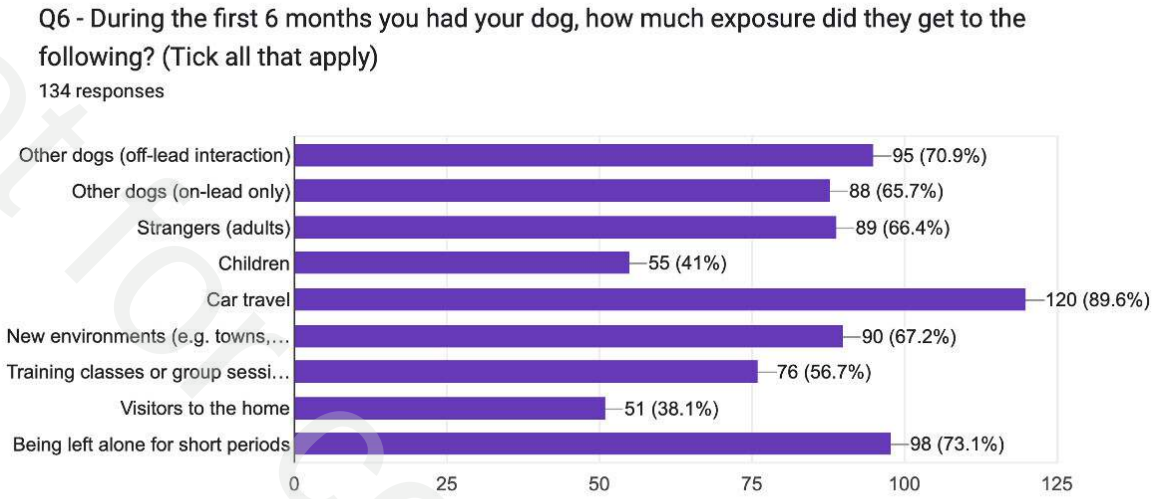
Exposure to strangers (adults) was fairly high at **66.4 percent** (n=89), but **exposure to children** was significantly lower, at only **41 percent** (n=55). This likely reflects the impact of lockdowns, school closures, and the general absence of household visitors during the height of the pandemic. Similarly, **visitors to the home** was one of the least reported categories at **38.1 percent** (n=51). This is particularly relevant, as a lack of exposure to unfamiliar people in the home environment may contribute to the types of behaviours commonly seen in reactive or nervous dogs, such as barking, guarding, or avoidance.

Exposure to new environments, such as towns or shops, was reported by **67.2 percent** (n=90), which suggests that many owners attempted to introduce their dogs to different locations during this time. However, the number is lower than might be expected in non-pandemic conditions, and some respondents commented elsewhere in the survey that they struggled to access suitable places or felt unsure about how to go about this safely under restrictions.

Training classes or group sessions were selected by **56.7 percent** (n=76), which again is a strong figure given the availability of such services during the pandemic. It also reflects the make-up of the survey group, many of whom are active in training circles or have dogs that compete in sports such as agility or obedience. That said, the fact that just under half of respondents were unable to access classes highlights the gap in early guidance that may have influenced later behavioural outcomes.

These results collectively show that while many owners made efforts to provide varied and valuable experiences, the pandemic environment created real barriers to achieving consistent and well-rounded socialisation. Gaps in exposure, particularly to children, home visitors, and structured environments, are likely to have played a role in the development of nervousness or reactivity in some dogs. This reinforces existing literature on the importance of early, controlled, and positive social contact, and highlights the long-term impact when these experiences are missed.

Q6 – Supporting Chart (During the first 6 months you had your dog, how much exposure did they go to the following?)



Q7 – Were there any restrictions at the time that made socialisation more difficult?

This question aimed to directly assess whether external factors, particularly those linked to COVID-19 restrictions, impacted the respondent's ability to properly socialise their dog during the early months of ownership. As discussed in earlier chapters, the importance of structured and consistent early exposure is widely supported in the literature, and any disruption to that process can have a noticeable impact on behaviour later in life.

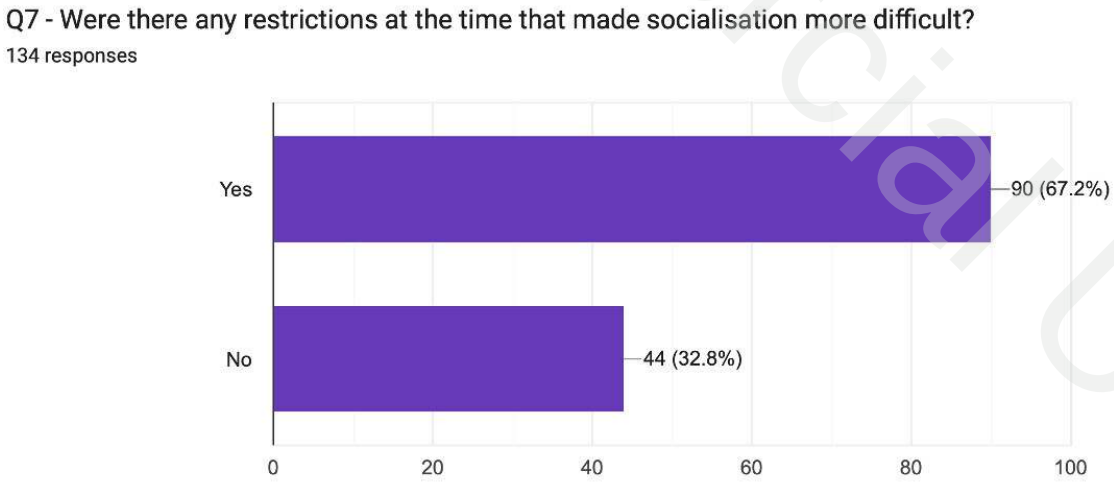
Of the 134 respondents, **67.2 percent** (n=90) answered **yes**, indicating that restrictions did make socialisation more difficult. This aligns strongly with the broader context of the pandemic, where access to public spaces, visitors, puppy classes, and travel was often limited or entirely unavailable. It supports the idea that many of the dogs in this study were raised during an atypical period in which normal routines were disrupted. The results of this question also help to explain some of the patterns seen in Q6, particularly the lower levels of exposure to visitors, children and structured environments.

The remaining **32.8 percent** (n=44) responded **no**, suggesting that just under one-third of the participants either acquired their dog at a time when restrictions had lifted or found ways to work around the limitations in place. In some cases, this may reflect geographical differences, with rural or low-density areas being subject to fewer constraints, or differences in how public health advice was interpreted and applied. It may also reflect individual effort, with some owners actively seeking alternative methods of exposure, such as virtual classes, solo walks in quiet areas, or safe, outdoor meetups with friends and family.

What is significant about these results is the confirmation that the majority of respondents recognised that there were obstacles beyond their control that shaped the early experiences of their dogs. This is not only helpful in understanding the behavioural themes that arise later in the study but also provides some reassurance to owners who may still be struggling with their dog's behaviour. It reframes the issue as one that is partially situational, rather than a failure of ownership or training.

This question also strengthens the relevance of the study as a whole, highlighting the unique developmental context these dogs were raised in. When viewed alongside responses to earlier questions, it becomes clear that a substantial number of dogs missed vital opportunities for socialisation, not through lack of care, but because of the societal conditions of the time. These findings offer important insight for trainers and behaviour professionals working with dogs who were acquired during or shortly after the pandemic years.

Q7 – Supporting Chart (Were there any restrictions at the time that made socialisation more difficult?)



Q7 – Were there any restrictions at the time that made socialisation more difficult? (Thematic Interpretation)

In addition to the closed yes/no question, respondents who answered “yes” were invited to expand on how restrictions had impacted their dog’s ability to socialise during the early months of ownership. These open-text answers provided valuable insight into the specific challenges owners faced. However, because the responses were qualitative in nature, a different approach was needed to interpret and present the data in a meaningful way.

To do this, I used **basic thematic analysis**, a method commonly used in behavioural and social research to identify patterns and trends in qualitative data. Thematic analysis involves reading through each response and coding the text for recurring ideas or concepts. These individual codes are then grouped into broader categories or themes that reflect common experiences across different responses.

The aim of this process was to identify the most frequently mentioned types of restriction and to visualise these in a clear and accessible way using a bar chart. This allows the reader to see at a glance what kinds of obstacles were most often experienced by participants, beyond the general acknowledgment that restrictions existed.

After reviewing all responses manually, six primary themes were identified:

General COVID lockdown restrictions

Travel limitations

Lack of access to puppy classes

Limited interaction with people

Limited interaction with dogs

Delayed access to training or behavioural support

Each response was reviewed for key phrases or patterns. For example, statements such as “we were in full lockdown and couldn’t meet anyone” or “we couldn’t go beyond our 5km limit” were coded under **General COVID lockdown** or **Travel restrictions** respectively. Comments like “puppy classes were not running at the time” or “training was all cancelled” were grouped under **No puppy classes**.

Other responses reflected emotional frustration, such as:

- “There was nowhere to take them to meet new people.”
- “We couldn’t even have family over to help get the dog used to visitors.”
- “Dog socialisation wasn’t allowed locally and group walks were banned.”

Although some comments referenced more than one issue, each response was counted once per relevant theme. This helped ensure a balanced view without over-representing any one response.

The most dominant theme, as expected, was **General COVID lockdown**, with 40 mentions. This covered wide-reaching restrictions that impacted nearly all aspects of life, from limits on movement to the closure of public spaces, businesses, and training venues. These restrictions created an environment in which even the most proactive owners struggled to expose their dogs to the kind of everyday sights, sounds, people, and dogs they would typically encounter during their formative months.

Travel restrictions were mentioned 8 times, with respondents referring specifically to things like “5km limits,” “not being able to leave the local area,” and “police checkpoints,” which further limited access to training venues, pet shops, or safe walking environments.

Lack of access to puppy classes came up in 5 responses. Several owners expressed disappointment that they had been unable to attend early training or socialisation sessions and worried that their dogs had missed out on a valuable foundation. Others noted that while some training was available online, it was not the same as in-person group exposure.

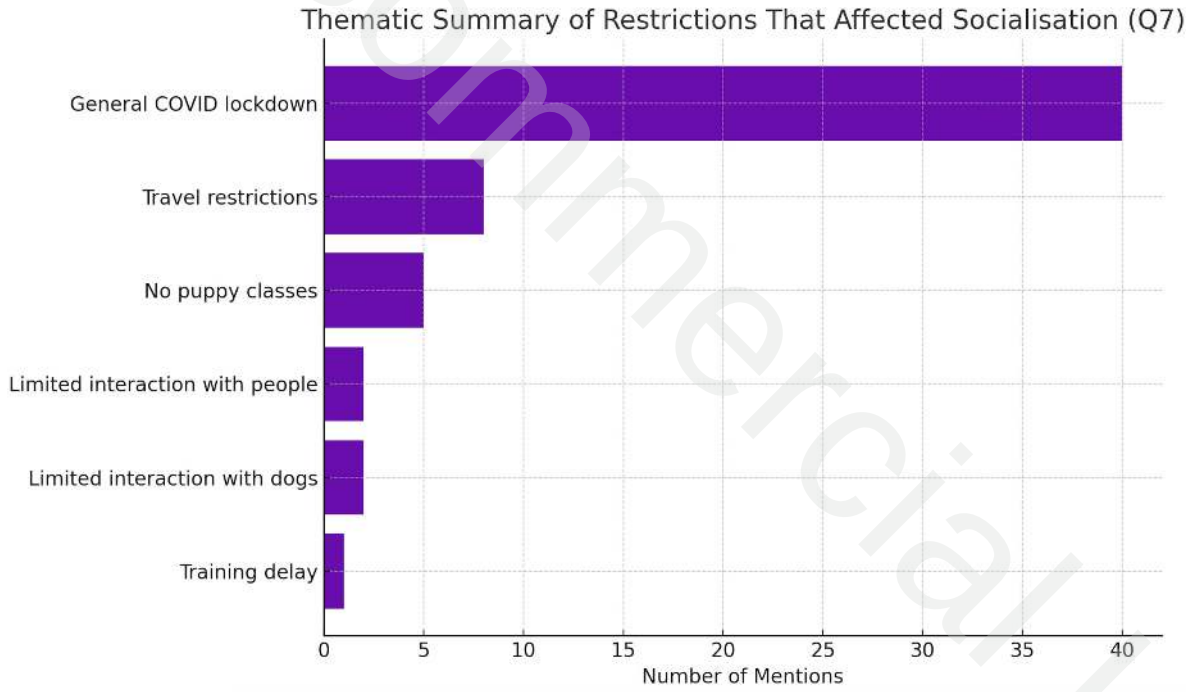
Themes around **limited interaction with people** and **limited interaction with other dogs** were mentioned less frequently (two responses each), though these were often implied elsewhere in comments coded under broader categories. One respondent wrote, “We live in a rural area, and with everything shut we didn’t see anyone else for weeks at a time,” while another noted, “We could only meet one person at a time outdoors, so the dog only met a few people in the first months.”

Only one participant referenced **delayed access to training**, noting that by the time sessions became available again, their dog had already developed strong behavioural reactions.

The thematic chart that accompanies this analysis provides a clear visual representation of the relative frequency of these issues. It highlights the breadth of challenges faced by owners during the pandemic and helps demonstrate the environmental context in which these dogs were raised. Including this form of analysis adds depth to the findings and allows the study to go beyond basic statistics, capturing the lived experiences and concerns of real owners in their own words.

This approach also reinforces the need for flexibility and support in behavioural work. Many of the behaviours discussed later in the study may be traced back to these missed early opportunities. By understanding the “why” behind those gaps, trainers and behaviour professionals are better equipped to provide empathetic and effective support to dogs and their owners who are still working through the long-term effects of those early months.

Q7 – Supporting Chart (Thematic Interpretation to 'yes' answers)



Q8 – Which of the following behaviours do you regularly notice in your dog?

This question aimed to gather data on the types of behaviours that owners currently observe in their dogs. It was designed as a "tick all that apply" format to allow participants to report more than one behavioural concern, reflecting the reality that dogs often show a combination of related issues. This section is especially relevant when considered alongside earlier questions around socialisation opportunities and exposure, as it gives insight into potential long-term effects of early developmental limitations.

Of the 134 participants, the most commonly reported behaviour was **barking or guarding in the home**, noted by **35.8 percent** (n=48) of owners. This aligns with trends seen during and post-pandemic, where many dogs became more sensitive to household changes, noise or movement due to reduced exposure to varied environments. Dogs that spent their formative months primarily in the home, without regular visitors or routine comings and goings, may have developed heightened alertness to activity in or around the home.

Reactivity to other dogs was reported by **32.1 percent** (n=43), and **nervousness or fear of strangers** was close behind at **30.6 percent** (n=41). These behaviours are commonly associated with limited early interaction and poor-quality socialisation. As noted in earlier results, many dogs missed out on consistent contact with unfamiliar dogs and people due to COVID-19 restrictions. This can lead to over-arousal, frustration, or avoidance behaviours when those experiences are later introduced in adolescence or adulthood. These findings are consistent with wider literature that links early socialisation to reduced fear responses in later life.

Discomfort with handling, such as being groomed or having paws touched, was noted by **28.4 percent** (n=38) of owners. This is another behaviour that can be influenced by early life experiences, particularly if dogs were not gently and regularly handled during the first few weeks at home. Reduced access to puppy classes, vet clinics, or grooming appointments during 2020 and 2021 may have contributed to this issue.

Lead pulling or difficulty focusing on walks was reported by **29.9 percent** (n=40). While this behaviour may relate more to training and breed-specific energy levels than socialisation alone, it can also reflect a lack of structured training during early development. With group classes and 1:1 sessions unavailable for many, basic lead skills may not have been taught consistently. For more sensitive dogs, pulling can also be a symptom of anxiety or over-stimulation in novel or unpredictable environments.

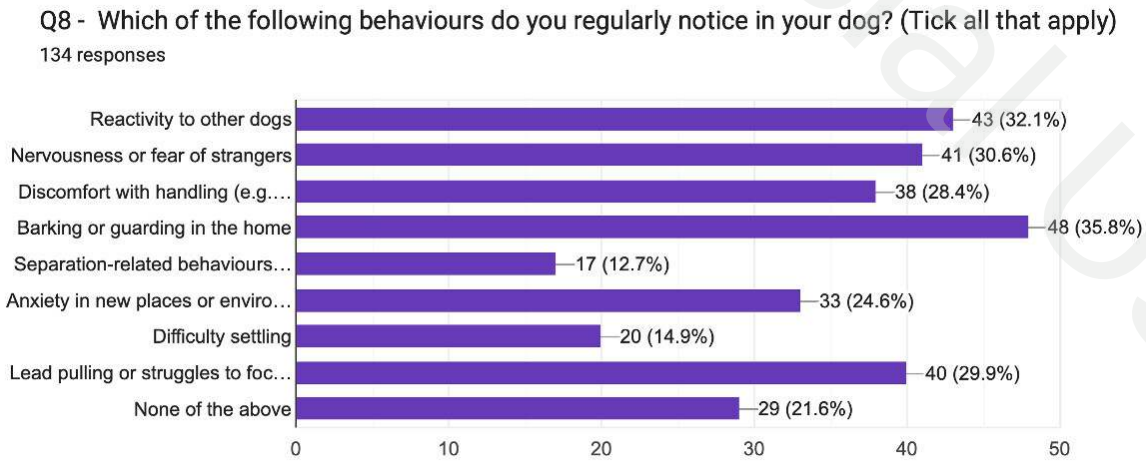
Interestingly, **anxiety in new places** was selected by **24.6 percent** (n=33), while **difficulty settling** was reported by **14.9 percent** (n=20). These lower but still significant numbers reflect the challenges some dogs face when routines change or when they are removed from familiar surroundings. Again, this can be traced to early experiences or lack thereof, where a dog's confidence in navigating unfamiliar spaces was never fully developed.

Separation-related behaviours, such as barking when left alone, destruction, or signs of stress, were reported by **12.7 percent** (n=17). Although this is a smaller percentage than might be expected, it may reflect the fact that many respondents are engaged in training communities or already have support. However, it is also possible that some owners may not have recognised the subtle signs of separation-related anxiety or may have adjusted their own routines to avoid leaving the dog alone.

Lastly, **21.6 percent** of participants (n=29) selected **"None of the above"**, indicating that their dogs do not currently show any of the behaviours listed. While this is encouraging, it still leaves the majority of dogs (over 78 percent) displaying at least one behavioural concern regularly. This aligns with the broader objective of the study, which is to better understand the behavioural outcomes associated with dogs raised during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

The data from this question, when cross-referenced with earlier insights on socialisation limitations and environmental exposure, helps build a fuller picture of how early developmental gaps may present in everyday life. It also supports the need for accessible behavioural support and structured guidance for owners, particularly those navigating the long-term effects of disrupted early experiences.

Q8 – Supporting Chart (Which of the following behaviours do you regular notice in your dog?)



Q9 – Has your dog been formally diagnosed with any behavioural condition?

This question aimed to explore whether any of the behaviours observed by participants had resulted in a **formal diagnosis**from a veterinary behaviourist or another qualified professional. This is an important distinction to make, as it allows for an understanding of how many dogs are receiving professional behavioural intervention, and how owners are identifying or responding to potential problems.

Of the 134 respondents, only **3.7 percent** (n=5) reported that their dog had received a **formal behavioural diagnosis**, while the remaining **96.3 percent** (n=129) had not. This is a particularly notable outcome when reviewed alongside the findings from **Q8**, where over three-quarters of owners reported noticing at least one behavioural concern in their dog.

The low rate of formal diagnosis may be influenced by several factors. Firstly, it suggests that most behavioural issues observed by owners are being managed informally, often through personal experience, online guidance, or the support of non-clinical trainers. It may also reflect the limited availability of veterinary behaviourists, particularly in rural or under-served regions, or the financial cost associated with seeking clinical-level assessment.

Another key factor is likely to be **owner perception**. Many dog guardians may not recognise certain behaviours as requiring formal diagnosis or may not be aware that clinical support is available. For example, behaviours such as barking at the door, pulling on lead, or struggling with handling may be viewed as “training issues” rather than as signs of anxiety or emotional dysregulation that could warrant professional evaluation.

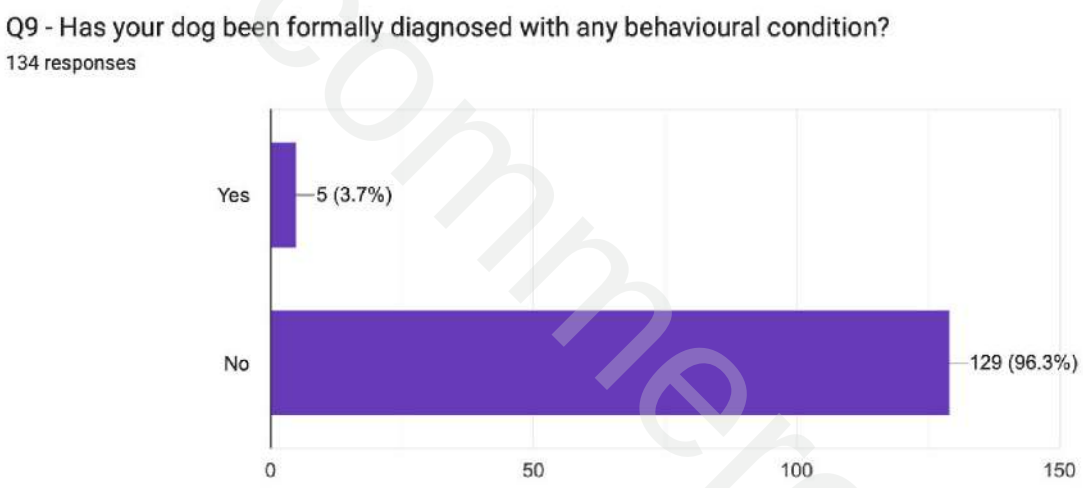
There is also a possibility that some behaviours, while troublesome, are being accepted as part of the dog’s personality or breed traits, rather than symptoms of a deeper issue. This perception can delay or prevent escalation to formal support. In some cases, owners may also worry about stigma or may not know what a behavioural diagnosis entails.

This finding does not imply that dogs are being neglected or ignored, but rather that **many cases are flying under the clinical radar**. It highlights the need for wider education on when and why to seek behavioural support and reinforces the role that early intervention can play in preventing long-term issues.

From a research perspective, this result also reinforces the relevance of the wider survey. While only a small number of participants had received a formal diagnosis, many had still experienced ongoing behavioural challenges. This supports the idea that disrupted early socialisation, as experienced by many pandemic-era dogs, can contribute to real and lasting behavioural outcomes, even if those issues are not recognised formally.

Overall, this question helps to bridge the gap between observed behaviours and the formal support structure around canine mental health. It adds weight to the argument that **behavioural support should be more widely accessible**, de-medicalised when appropriate, and embedded into general training guidance for all dogs, not just those with diagnoses.

Q9 – Supporting Chart (Has your dog been formally diagnosed with any behavioural condition?)



Q9 – Has your dog been formally diagnosed with any behavioural condition? (Thematic Summary)

This question offered a follow-up opportunity for those respondents who had indicated that their dog had received a formal behavioural diagnosis. While only **3.7 percent** (n=5) of participants answered “yes” to the original closed question (as discussed in the previous section), those who did were invited to describe the nature of the diagnosis in more detail.

To make sense of these open-text responses and present the findings in a meaningful way, **basic thematic analysis** was carried out. This approach involves reading each response closely, identifying recurring words or ideas, and coding them into shared categories. The purpose of this analysis was to give context to the relatively low number of formally diagnosed cases and to better understand what kinds of behavioural labels or concerns were raised when clinical input had been sought.

From the five submissions, **four distinct themes** emerged:

- **Generalised anxiety** (4 mentions)
- **Fear or panic-based behaviour** (2 mentions)
- **Unclear or informal diagnosis** (2 mentions)
- **Neurodivergent traits (e.g. autism)** (1 mention)

While the total number of responses was small, several entries included multiple concerns or layered descriptions, which is why some categories received more than one mention.

The most frequently cited theme was **generalised anxiety**, which appeared in forms such as “general anxiety,” “struggles to settle,” or “broad anxiety diagnosis.” These responses point to dogs experiencing ongoing difficulties across multiple contexts, rather than isolated triggers. This reflects a wider behavioural trend observed in dogs with disrupted early socialisation, particularly those raised during the COVID-19 restrictions, where generalised anxiety can manifest from lack of exposure or inconsistent routines.

The next most common category was **fear or panic-based behaviour**, cited in two of the responses. This included references to dogs “panicking when people approach” or “barking at people,” suggesting a fear-driven response to social stimuli. These dogs may not have had adequate early contact with a variety of people, spaces or stimuli, and their behaviour has escalated to a level requiring professional intervention.

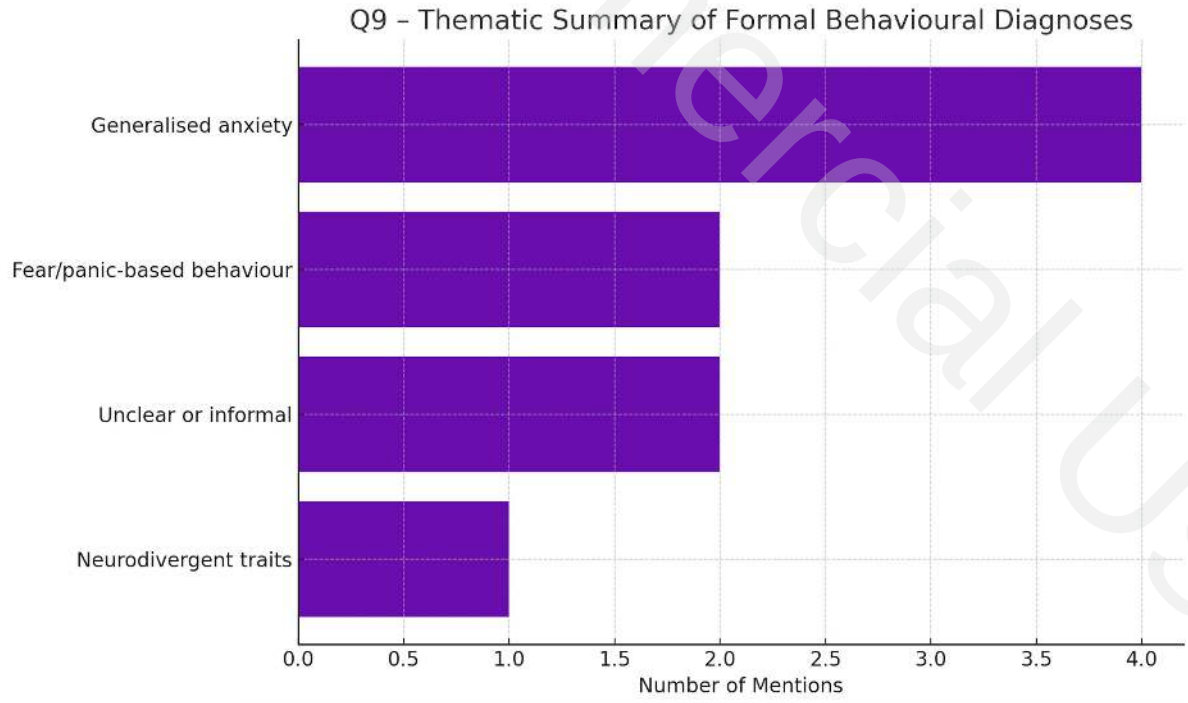
Another theme that emerged was **unclear or informal diagnosis**, also mentioned in two responses. These included statements such as “not really formal but we think she’s got something going on,” or “not a diagnosis but flagged by a trainer.” This highlights an important nuance in the dataset: while the original question asked about formal diagnosis, some owners may not have understood what constitutes clinical diagnosis or may have used the space to share informal assessments provided by trainers or observed by themselves. This suggests a gap in public understanding around behavioural services and the role of clinical professionals.

Finally, one response referenced **neurodivergent traits**, describing the dog as "potentially autistic." While autism is a developing area of interest in veterinary behavioural science, it remains a controversial and poorly understood label in canine contexts. However, its appearance here may reflect increasing awareness among dog guardians and a desire to understand and label what they observe in their pets.

Despite the small sample size, this thematic breakdown is valuable. It shows that, even among those seeking a formal behavioural diagnosis, the conditions described align closely with wider patterns observed in the general population of the study — namely, anxiety, fear, difficulty regulating behaviour, and social discomfort. These themes reinforce earlier insights about the potential long-term behavioural impact of restricted socialisation, reduced public access, and missed exposure opportunities during critical developmental periods.

The chart produced from this thematic summary provides a simple visual snapshot of the key concerns raised by those few owners whose dogs had received more formal recognition of behavioural issues. While this is a small dataset, it adds depth to the broader findings and reinforces the importance of improving access to behavioural support, as well as improving owner awareness of what formal diagnosis involves and when it may be appropriate.

Q9 – Supporting Chart (Thematic Interpretation to 'yes' answers)



Q10 – Have you worked with a trainer or behaviourist?

This question was included to assess how many owners had sought professional support for their dogs, and whether that support came from a **trainer** or a **behaviourist**. To avoid confusion between the two roles, the question itself provided a brief description: a **dog trainer** typically supports day-to-day skills like loose lead walking, recall, and general obedience, while a **behaviourist** addresses more complex issues such as anxiety, reactivity, or aggression. This clarification was added deliberately to ensure more accurate and informed responses.

Out of 134 participants, the majority, **56.7 percent** (n=76), reported working with a **trainer**. This is encouraging and suggests that many owners recognised the importance of structured guidance in teaching their dogs foundational behaviours. Given that much of the survey group came from training- or agility-focused communities, this result also reflects the population's general interest in active engagement with their dogs.

18.7 percent (n=25) had worked with a **behaviourist**, which is notably higher than the 3.7 percent (n=5) who reported a formal behavioural diagnosis in Q9. This discrepancy suggests that while formal diagnosis remains rare, many owners are still accessing behaviour support in a less clinical, but nonetheless structured, capacity. It also highlights the importance of distinguishing between behaviourists operating in a training or advisory role, and those with formal veterinary or clinical accreditation. In rural areas or locations with limited resources, owners may rely on general trainers with behavioural experience rather than pursue formal diagnostic pathways.

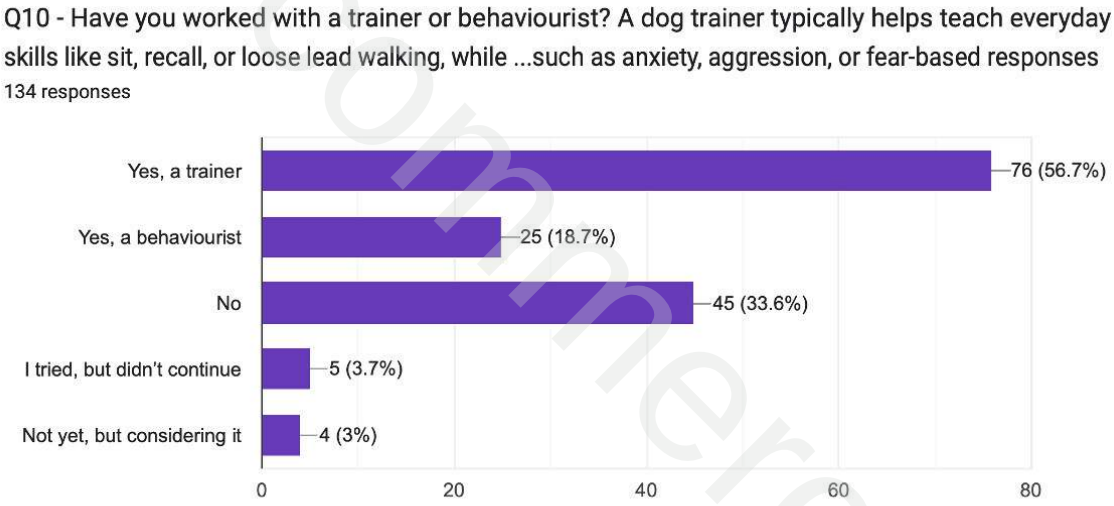
That said, a significant portion of respondents, **33.6 percent** (n=45), reported **not working with either a trainer or a behaviourist**. This may reflect financial or geographical limitations, or a belief that the issues they were facing were not serious enough to require professional input. It may also suggest that some owners prefer to rely on self-research, peer advice, or online content, particularly if behavioural concerns are mild or intermittent. However, this group also represents an opportunity for outreach and education, particularly if owners are managing more serious issues without appropriate support.

Additionally, **3.7 percent** (n=5) indicated that they **tried but did not continue** with training or behavioural support. These cases may reflect poor fit with a trainer, challenges with accessibility or schedule, or simply a lack of visible progress. While a small number, it serves as a reminder that even when owners are open to help, the experience must feel relevant and achievable for them to remain engaged.

Finally, **3 percent** (n=4) selected **"Not yet, but considering it"**, which offers a hopeful note that there is interest and openness to seeking help, even if action has not yet been taken. These owners may benefit from improved signposting and reassurance around what professional support can offer.

Overall, this question helped to paint a more complete picture of how behavioural and training concerns are being addressed post-COVID. When compared with the findings from Q8 (types of behaviours observed) and Q9 (rates of formal diagnosis), it becomes clear that **many owners are taking proactive steps** to manage their dogs' development and challenges. However, there is still a portion of the population navigating this process alone, or without structured input, which suggests that ongoing education and support resources remain essential.

Q10 – Supporting Chart (Have you worked with a trainer or behaviourist?)



Q11 – Do you feel your dog missed out on early experiences because of lockdown or restrictions?

This question was included to give owners the opportunity to reflect on their dog's early development and to consider whether the impact of lockdown or social restrictions had affected the exposure and learning their dog received during critical stages. While earlier questions in the survey explored specific types of exposure, this question allowed for a more general assessment based on the owner's overall perception of their dog's early life.

Out of the 134 participants, **55.2 percent** (n=74) responded **Yes**, indicating that they felt their dog had missed out on valuable early experiences due to lockdown or public restrictions. This result is consistent with earlier findings, particularly from Q6 and Q7, where a significant number of owners reported limitations on access to people, other dogs, new environments, and structured training. The agreement here reinforces the idea that many owners are aware of the developmental gaps that occurred and recognise that these may have influenced how their dog behaves now.

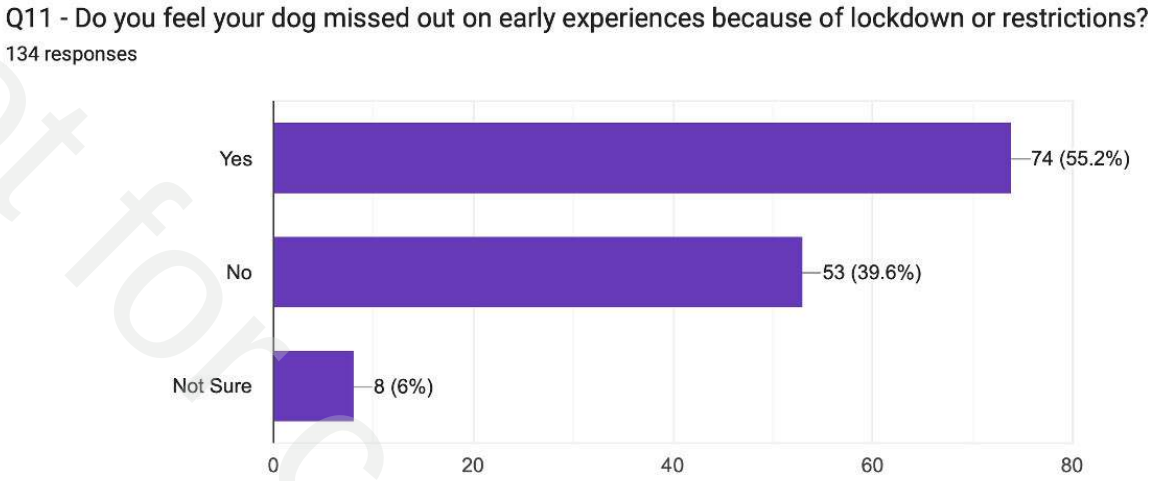
39.6 percent (n=53) answered **No**, suggesting they did not feel their dog had missed out during this time. These respondents may have acquired their dog after restrictions eased, or they may have been particularly proactive in finding alternative ways to provide stimulation and social experiences. In some cases, this group may also reflect owners of more resilient or adaptable dogs, whose temperament allowed them to cope better despite limited exposure. It is also worth considering that dogs in quieter or rural areas may have had more freedom to explore outdoors, even when urban settings were restricted.

A small percentage, **6 percent** (n=8), answered **Not sure**, which reflects the complexity of assessing development and behaviour in a home environment. For many owners, it may be difficult to isolate the effects of missed exposure from other influences such as genetics, temperament, or household routine. The fact that some were uncertain reinforces the need for accessible education around critical development periods and the longer-term impact that gaps in early learning can have on behaviour and confidence.

Taken together, these findings offer a strong conclusion to the behavioural section of the survey. More than half of respondents explicitly recognised that their dogs were affected by the lockdown years in terms of social and environmental learning. This confirms the relevance and value of this study, as it highlights not only the behavioural outcomes observed but also the awareness that many owners have of how those outcomes may have developed.

This question also supports the case for ongoing behaviour support and professional guidance for owners who may still be dealing with the impact of disrupted early learning. While some dogs will have adjusted over time, others may continue to experience anxiety, reactivity, or handling sensitivity that links back to this unique period of social isolation.

Q11 – Supporting Chart (Do you feel your dog missed out on early experiences because of lockdown or restrictions?)



Q12 – Please describe your dog

This open-text question allowed participants to describe their dog in their own words. Unlike previous questions, which focused on structured behaviours or exposure to specific situations, this item invited reflection on the dog's overall character and tendencies. It offered an opportunity to capture how owners perceive their dog's personality, strengths and challenges, outside of predefined options. This helped provide a more human and holistic picture of each dog beyond data points and metrics.

Because the responses were qualitative in nature, basic thematic analysis was used to group common themes and traits. Each response was reviewed and coded based on descriptive language and key behavioural indicators. Many of the dogs described were characterised by more than one theme, so each entry was allowed to contribute to multiple categories. This approach ensures a fuller representation of the emotional and behavioural range expressed by owners.

The most frequent theme to emerge was **fear or anxiety**, which appeared in **31** responses. Owners used terms such as “nervous”, “timid”, “anxious”, and “wary” to describe their dogs. These comments often reflected broader behavioural struggles, such as being hesitant around strangers, avoiding busy places, or showing physical tension when outside of their comfort zone. For example, one participant described their dog as “very sweet, but nervous around people and gets anxious in new situations,” while another noted “scared of noise and unsure when walking near roads.” These comments are consistent with earlier questions in the study that identified reduced exposure to people, environments, and noise as a result of lockdown or post-lockdown routines.

The second most frequent theme was **reactivity to people**, which appeared in **30** responses. Owners reported that their dogs barked at strangers, were uncomfortable with visitors to the home, or were defensive when approached by unfamiliar individuals. While often overlapping with fear and anxiety, this theme was distinct in its expression. Some dogs were described as “barking at anyone who passes the window” or “nervous until they know someone well.” This shows that for many owners, the consequences of missed early socialisation with people are still apparent in daily life. It also supports earlier findings that social sensitivity is a common issue in dogs raised during or shortly after lockdown restrictions.

Good temperament was noted in **27** responses, indicating that many owners viewed their dogs as sweet-natured, affectionate, or stable. Phrases such as “lovely character,” “very affectionate,” and “brilliant dog at home” suggest that while some dogs may have behavioural quirks, they are still viewed positively and with warmth. This is an important balance in the overall picture of post-pandemic dogs. It demonstrates that while behavioural challenges may exist, strong emotional bonds between dogs and owners have still formed and that many dogs are coping well, especially in familiar and predictable settings.

Struggles in new places appeared in **12** responses. This theme captured dogs that were specifically reported to find new environments overwhelming, overstimulating, or hard to manage. Some owners described their dogs as “brilliant at home but shut down when out and about” or “happy in familiar places but gets overwhelmed quickly in town.” These kinds of responses help explain the relationship between environmental confidence and exposure, reinforcing the importance of gradual and structured outings during early developmental stages.

Sound sensitivity was mentioned by **seven** participants. These dogs were reported to struggle with loud or sudden noises, such as traffic, fireworks, or even household sounds. While fewer in number than other categories, these responses are meaningful, particularly given that noise phobias can become more intense over time if not carefully addressed. For some dogs, growing up in a quieter lockdown environment may have contributed to a lack of habituation to common sounds.

Training success was mentioned in **five** responses. These owners noted that their dogs were well-behaved, responsive, or had learned commands easily. Comments included “great in training,” “picks things up quickly,” and “well behaved once they know what to do.” This suggests that for some owners, consistency and proactive training made a significant difference in outcome, even when other aspects of social exposure were limited.

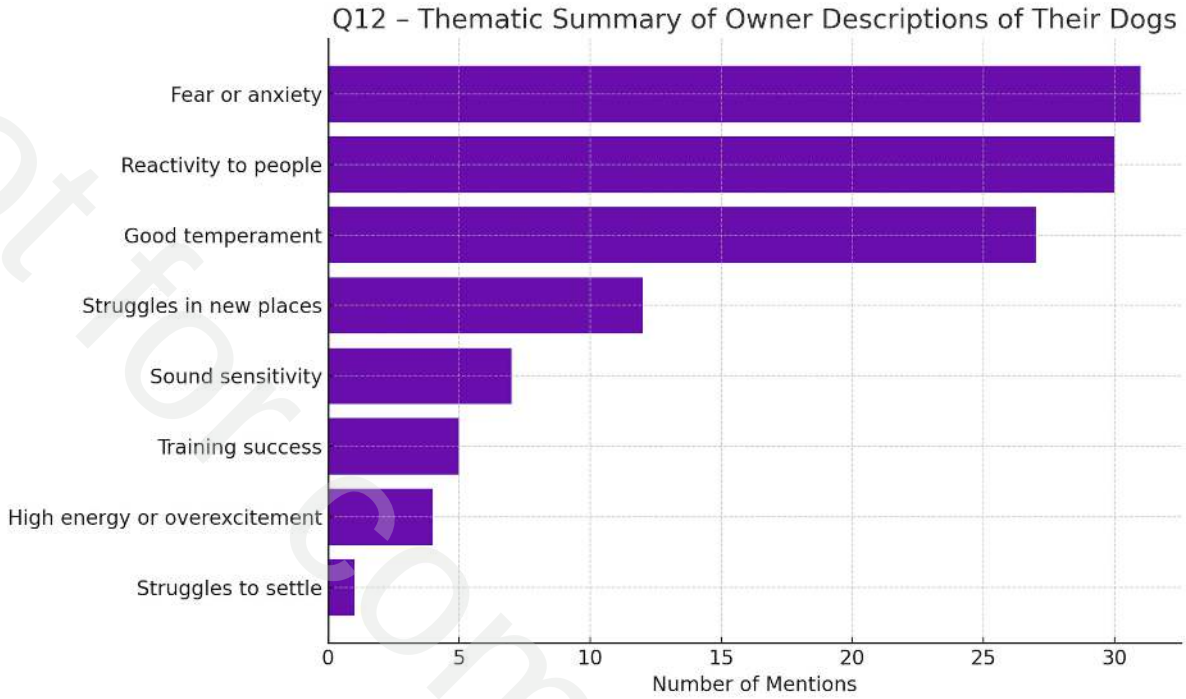
High energy or overexcitement was noted in **four** responses. These included terms like “manic,” “hyper,” or “gets very excitable.” This trait may reflect both breed characteristics and emotional dysregulation, particularly in dogs that missed early guidance around calming themselves in stimulating environments. These dogs may not have had enough practice in pacing themselves or learning how to cope with change during their early months.

Finally, **struggles to settle** appeared in **one** response. While only a single entry used this phrasing directly, it is likely that this issue is underreported, as similar behaviours may have been described instead through terms like excitable, alert, or busy. Nevertheless, the theme remains relevant, as many behaviourists report challenges with rest and recovery in dogs with disrupted early development.

Taken together, these themes provide a wide-ranging view of how owners experience their dogs day-to-day. While many responses conveyed genuine affection and a sense of connection, there were also consistent patterns of concern. Anxiety, sensitivity, and social discomfort were prominent, particularly in contexts involving novelty or unfamiliar people. The positive themes of temperament and training show that outcomes are not all negative and that good progress is possible even under less-than-ideal circumstances.

This analysis adds further depth to the findings of the study and supports the argument that early experience plays a significant role in long-term behavioural development. The emotional language used by owners and the range of behaviours described emphasise the importance of continued support, both educational and practical, for dogs that lived through these unique developmental years.

Q12 – Supporting Chart (Thematic Interpretation to 'Describe your Dog' answers)



Q13 – If you could go back and change or add anything to your dog's early experiences, what would it be?

This question invited participants to reflect on their dog's early developmental period and share any regrets or adjustments they would have made in hindsight. It was designed to explore areas where owners may feel that early learning opportunities were missed or not optimally structured. The question yielded a rich range of qualitative responses which were analysed thematically to identify key areas of concern or learning. Each response was reviewed and grouped according to core themes that emerged. In total, 134 answers were considered for this question.

The most common theme to emerge was the desire for **improved socialisation opportunities**, which was mentioned by 28 respondents. These owners consistently reflected that their dogs had missed out on vital experiences with people, dogs, environments, and everyday stimuli. Participants mentioned that their dogs were not taken to public places such as cafés, high streets, parks or training venues as much as they would have liked. Several acknowledged that social exposure in a controlled and gradual way might have helped their dogs develop better confidence and reduced reactivity or sensitivity later on. Some owners specifically wished they had provided more positive interactions with calm dogs or introduced their dogs to new situations at an earlier age. A number also reported that they now realise the value of structured puppy classes in supporting early development and would have enrolled sooner if circumstances had allowed.

The second theme, raised by 24 participants, was the **impact of the COVID-19 lockdowns**. Owners expressed frustration that pandemic restrictions coincided with critical socialisation periods and limited access to environments, services and social contact. In many cases, these constraints meant that dogs could not meet people outside their households or attend group training sessions. Some participants shared that their puppies had to attend vet appointments alone, which may have contributed to anxiety in later life. Others noted that their dog's first few months were spent in highly limited surroundings with very little stimulation beyond the home. A number of owners expressed that they simply would not have chosen to get a puppy during that time had they known how long the restrictions would last or the level of disruption involved.

A further 20 responses focused on the need for **earlier or more structured training**. These included comments about wishing they had focused on settling behaviours, loose lead walking, recall or ignoring distractions much earlier in the dog's life. Some shared that they did not realise how quickly habits could form or how difficult it could be to address certain behaviours once they had become established. There was a particular focus on consistency, with a few owners stating that they would have benefitted from having a better trainer from the outset. Some mentioned regret at not being more assertive in their choice of trainer or at staying with training sessions that were not suited to their dog's learning needs.

Despite the challenges, 15 respondents said they would make **no changes or were happy with their dog's early experience**. Some felt that being unable to attend busy spaces or experience high levels of social stimulation actually allowed their dogs to observe the world in a calm and less pressured way. A few people noted that their dogs benefited from watching rather than interacting, particularly during the pandemic when physical distance was enforced. These owners often reported that their dogs were able to adapt well or that they had made the best of a difficult situation with creative home-based activities.

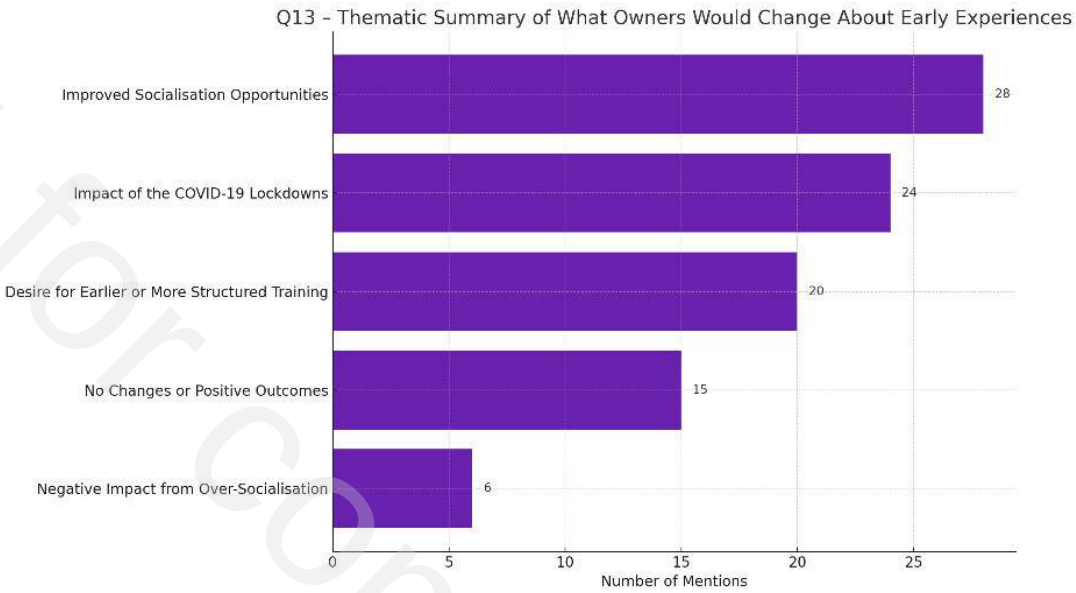
A smaller but notable group of participants, totalling six responses, reported that **over-socialisation or lack of control in early interactions** had contributed to issues in later life. These owners wished they had limited on-lead greetings or chosen more carefully which dogs their puppies met. Some reported reactivity or frustration behaviours developing from dogs expecting to greet every dog they saw. This shows the need for balance in early socialisation, ensuring that dogs not only meet others but also learn to disengage and self-regulate in a range of settings.

Other comments focused on specific experiences such as **environmental exposure and noise sensitivity**, with some wishing they had introduced their dogs to town centres, traffic or loud sounds at a younger age. A few mentioned crate training, desensitisation to grooming, or helping dogs become comfortable being left alone. Two respondents specifically mentioned that more time alone early on might have prevented the development of separation-related behaviours later. A small group expressed concern about breeder choices, reporting that a poor start in life, multiple rehomes or inadequate puppy care before adoption had negatively impacted their dog's confidence.

Overall, this question provided valuable insight into owner learning and awareness. It highlighted that many participants now recognise the importance of early, structured and thoughtful experiences in shaping long-term behaviour. For those who experienced restrictions due to the pandemic, there was a strong sense that the timing of their dog's development was out of their control. However, this did not prevent owners from expressing a clear understanding of what they might do differently in future. The reflective nature of this question also underlined how invested owners are in their dogs' well-being and how small changes in the early weeks can make a significant difference down the line.

This thematic analysis confirms the value of giving dog owners clear and timely guidance on early life experiences. It also supports the need for realistic advice, especially during unpredictable life events like national lockdowns. The recurring themes of socialisation, training, and access to environments provide an important context for how behavioural patterns may have been shaped in dogs raised between 2019 and 2022.

Q13 – Supporting Chart (Thematic Interpretation to 'What would you change to your dogs early experiences' answers)



Q14 – What type of support, advice, or training has helped you most (if any)?

This question aimed to explore which types of support owners found most beneficial when managing and improving their dogs' behaviour, confidence and overall wellbeing. Owners were invited to share what had worked for them, from training classes and dog sports to personal insight and peer support. The responses were analysed thematically to identify key patterns and recurring themes across the sample.

The most common theme was **General Training and Obedience**, noted by 43 participants. This included structured training classes, obedience work, recall practice, foundation skills and engagement strategies. Owners highlighted the value of early and consistent training in helping dogs build basic life skills and better understand what was expected of them. Many said that training helped reduce reactivity, increase confidence, and improve their dog's ability to work around distractions. Several participants pointed out that learning how to teach settle behaviours, impulse control and general focus had significant positive impacts both at home and in public settings.

Agility Training was the second most frequent theme, cited by 29 respondents. Many owners credited agility with giving their dogs purpose, confidence and a way to channel their energy in a positive direction. The structure and clarity of agility training helped some dogs learn to cope with stimulation, while others simply enjoyed the routine and handler engagement. It should be noted that the prominence of agility in this data may be higher than in broader populations, due to the Facebook groups used to share the questionnaire. Many of the groups were made up of agility and sport dog enthusiasts, which could have skewed the responses toward those who regularly train or compete in these disciplines. While agility clearly has great benefits, this context is important when interpreting how commonly it was identified as a helpful support method.

Other or Mixed Support was recorded in 27 responses. These included combinations of flyball, mantrailing, gundog work, trick training, scentwork and personalised routines. Several owners described how they created a patchwork of methods and ideas based on their individual dog's needs. One mentioned that they realised their dog did not respond to treats, so finding people who understood that and supported their training approach made a huge difference. Others paired physical activity with structured quiet time or used foundation games from well-known online trainers to help their dogs build confidence at their own pace. These responses showed that many owners were highly engaged and thoughtful about the type of help they sought out.

A group of 13 participants reported **No Support Used**. Some owners were professional trainers themselves, while others had not accessed any support or did not feel the options available to them were appropriate. In a few cases, owners expressed frustration at finding the right kind of support or simply felt that no intervention was needed.

Confidence and Emotional Support was highlighted by 8 respondents. This theme focused on approaches that supported the dog's emotional regulation. These included desensitisation, building trust at the dog's pace, and helping the dog feel safe in new environments. Owners in this category were often aware of the importance of reading their dog's signals and helping them avoid negative experiences. In some cases, structured games that promoted independence and recovery from over-arousal were mentioned.

Behavioural Support was reported in 6 responses. These were typically centred on formal consultations with behaviourists. The value of working with a professional who considered the dog's history, emotional state and underlying causes of behaviour was described positively. Behaviourists who focused on fear and reactivity, or those who brought breed-specific knowledge to the consultation, were mentioned as especially helpful.

Community and Peer Support was noted in 4 responses. Informal support from friends, dog sport communities or breed networks provided encouragement and understanding, especially when owners felt isolated or misunderstood. Having someone to talk to, bounce ideas off, or reassure them that their dog was not alone in their behaviour often helped owners stay motivated and less overwhelmed.

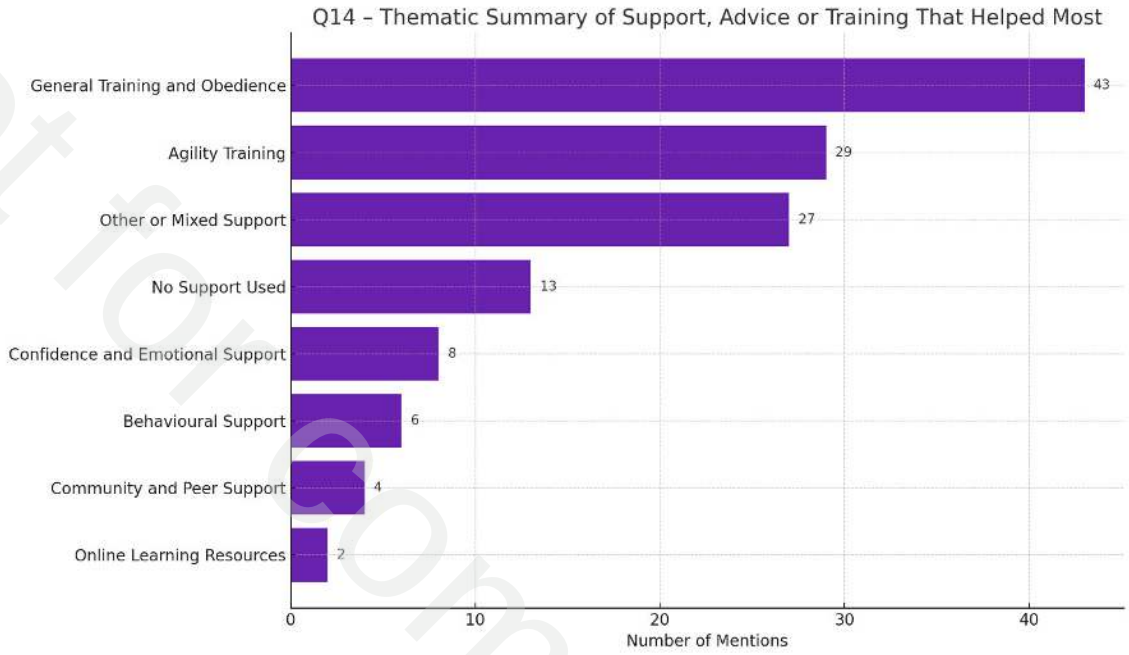
Online Learning Resources were identified in 2 responses. These included references to digital courses, YouTube, and Facebook groups that provided accessible training ideas or explanations of behavioural science. While this number was low in comparison to other themes, the availability and quality of online learning may still be an important layer of informal support for owners who did not specify it in their answer.

Overall, this question highlighted that the most useful support is often the one that suits both the dog and the handler. Owners clearly valued approaches that respected their dog's personality, breed, and challenges. While many found agility and formal training helpful, others stressed the importance of giving their dog time, space and calm reassurance.

It is also important to consider the sample group when interpreting these results. Because the survey was largely distributed through Facebook groups related to agility and dog sports, there may have been a higher concentration of agility-based responses than would be expected in the general dog-owning population. This does not lessen the impact of agility as a useful training avenue, but it does highlight the importance of understanding the context of the data.

This variety of responses reinforces that there is no one-size-fits-all model when it comes to support. Instead, the most effective results come when owners have access to a range of options and are empowered to choose what works best for them and their dog.

Q14 – Supporting Chart (Thematic Interpretation to 'What type of support, advice, or training has helped you most (if any)?' answers)



Q15 – What kind of support do you feel would help you most now?

This question asked owners to consider what kind of support, advice, or training they currently feel would be most helpful to them and their dogs. It follows on from earlier questions exploring what support had been useful in the past, and offers insight into how those needs have changed or developed over time. Each response was reviewed and coded using basic thematic analysis, and the results were grouped into broader themes to reflect the most common types of support owners are now looking for.

The most frequently mentioned category was **Group Training or Classes**, cited by 35 participants. This included anything from general obedience classes to structured social training environments. Many owners expressed an interest in working in a group setting where their dogs could learn to engage with distractions and other dogs in a controlled way. The benefit of being around others in a training context was highlighted as both educational and reassuring, particularly for owners still managing fallout from poor socialisation opportunities during lockdown. Group training also allowed for routine and consistency, which many respondents felt they were now ready to prioritise or return to.

Next was **1:1 or Tailored Training**, with 28 responses. This reflected a clear desire for more individualised help. Owners noted that while group settings can be valuable, some dogs, particularly those who are reactive or anxious, require a more bespoke approach. The importance of being able to work at the dog's pace, address specific problems, and feel fully heard by a trainer was a key factor in these responses. Some participants had already explored 1:1 support but were looking to re-engage, while others felt that they had not yet found the right match and were keen to explore options that would better suit their dog's personality and their own confidence as handlers.

Behaviourist or Specialist Support came next, appearing in 22 responses. This theme was focused on owners who wanted more formal behavioural input, especially for issues such as anxiety, reactivity or emotional regulation. Several responses mentioned the need for expert insight into more complex behaviour, particularly where there had been little improvement with standard training methods. Others expressed a desire to better understand their dog's triggers and to be supported through longer-term behaviour change plans. This response aligns with earlier data suggesting that, although behaviourists are not always the first port of call, their input is often valued once accessed.

Online Training or Support was identified in 16 responses. This included online video content, webinars, virtual consultations or digital learning platforms. Participants appreciated the flexibility of online formats, especially when in-person access was difficult due to location, transport or time constraints. This theme also included references to online communities and Facebook groups, which some owners used as informal support spaces. The appeal of this option seemed to be its adaptability – owners could dip in and out of content when needed and revisit advice at their own pace.

Support with Socialisation was noted in 15 responses. This category was shaped around those looking for controlled opportunities to expose their dogs to new environments, people or other animals. There was clear recognition that their dog's early socialisation had been limited, and owners were looking for structured ways to catch up or rebuild. Some requested specific socialisation classes, while others simply wanted guidance on how to gradually build confidence in different settings. A number of owners also mentioned struggling to know whether they were doing the right thing in these situations, and hoped for more direction or reassurance from professionals.

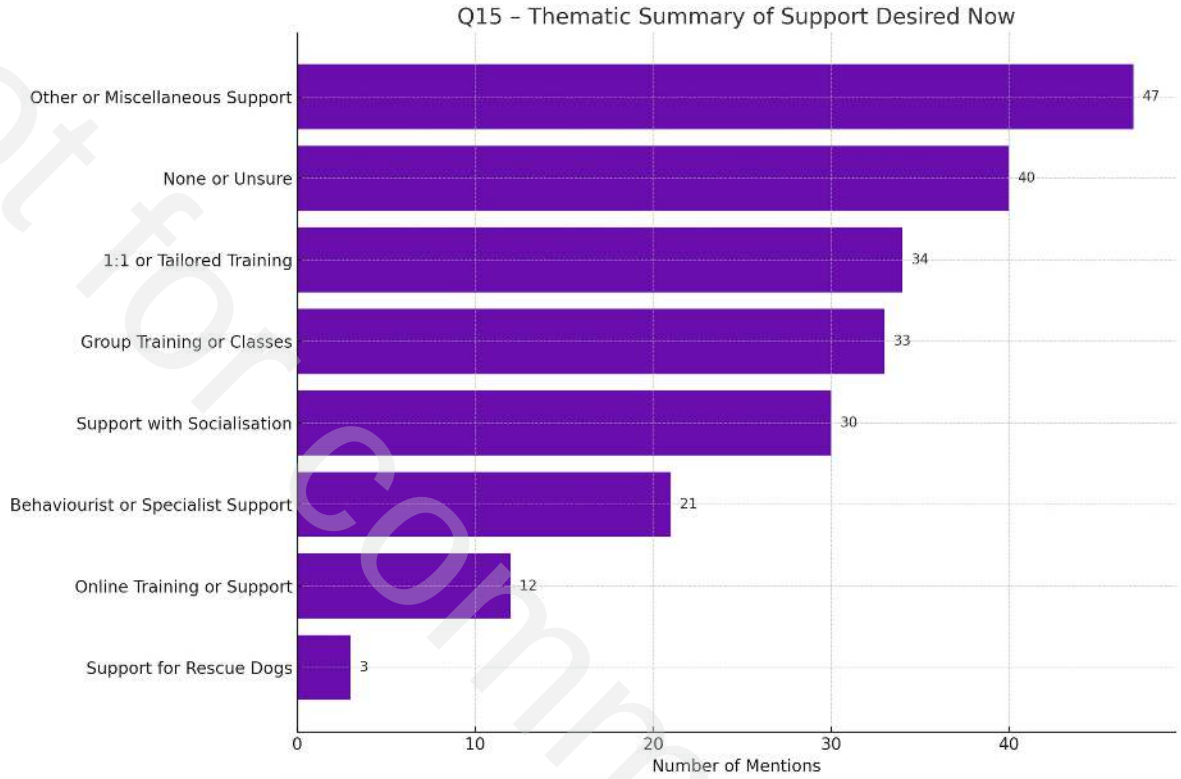
Support for Rescue Dogs appeared in 8 responses. These were typically from owners who had adopted dogs with little known history, and who were struggling to meet their dog's emotional needs. There was a strong sense that standard advice did not always apply, and these owners were looking for support that took into account the specific challenges rescue dogs often present. Themes included trauma, mistrust, poor early experiences and a lack of exposure to everyday life. Owners felt that having access to trainers or behaviourists who understood this context was essential in helping their dogs succeed in the long term.

Finally, **None or Unsure** was chosen by 6 participants. These were owners who felt they either did not need any further support or were uncertain about what would be helpful. In some cases, it was because their dog was now settled, while in others, the answers suggested a lack of awareness about what support options were available or how they might help.

Overall, this question revealed a broad spectrum of support needs, with a clear demand for both traditional in-person training and more flexible or specialist options. The responses also reinforce the point that support cannot be approached with a one-size-fits-all mindset. Owners and their dogs benefit most when there is a range of pathways available, allowing them to choose what works best for their circumstances and goals.

These findings highlight the importance of not just offering more support, but offering the right kind of support. As dogs move into new life stages or as challenges emerge, many owners are looking for help that is compassionate, evidence-based, and responsive to the real-world dynamics they face every day.

Q15 – Supporting Chart (Thematic Interpretation to 'What kind of support do you feel would help you most now?' answers)



Q16 – If there's anything you wish you'd had more support with when your dog was younger, what would it be?

As part of the thematic analysis for this open-ended question, responses were coded into key recurring categories. These categories reflect the types of support owners felt were lacking during their dogs' early development and highlight some valuable insight into perceived gaps in canine training and behavioural support. The full breakdown can be seen in the corresponding chart.

The most frequently noted theme was **"No Additional Support Needed"**, with 60 responses falling into this category. This suggests that a significant portion of respondents either felt well-prepared when raising their dog or had dogs who developed without any notable behavioural difficulties. When this is compared to other questions within the survey, such as Q14 and Q15 where a number of respondents had not sought professional support and felt little need for additional help, it highlights a segment of dog owners who either had the confidence and experience to manage early training themselves, or who were fortunate enough not to encounter significant challenges. However, as seen in earlier responses, particularly those in Q8 regarding regularly observed behavioural issues, there is a slight contradiction that may suggest some of these owners may have benefitted from more targeted input, had they recognised those behaviours as areas of concern.

The next most common theme was **"General Training Knowledge"**, cited by 46 respondents. This was a broad category that encompassed owners wanting more clarity or understanding around how to train effectively, structure their sessions, or respond to unwanted behaviours in a consistent way. This group was less about behavioural concerns and more about seeking confidence and structure in the training process. This aligns with comments in Q14 and Q15 that reflect a desire for ongoing learning, accessible advice and support that is simple to apply in everyday life.

A particularly important category to highlight is **"Socialisation"**, raised directly by 12 respondents. This refers to owners wishing they had done more to expose their dogs to different people, dogs, environments and experiences. Many of these responses included mention of how lockdown restrictions limited their opportunities. This aligns closely with data across Q6, Q7 and Q11, where gaps in early socialisation were consistently reflected in both the quantitative data and the open-ended feedback.

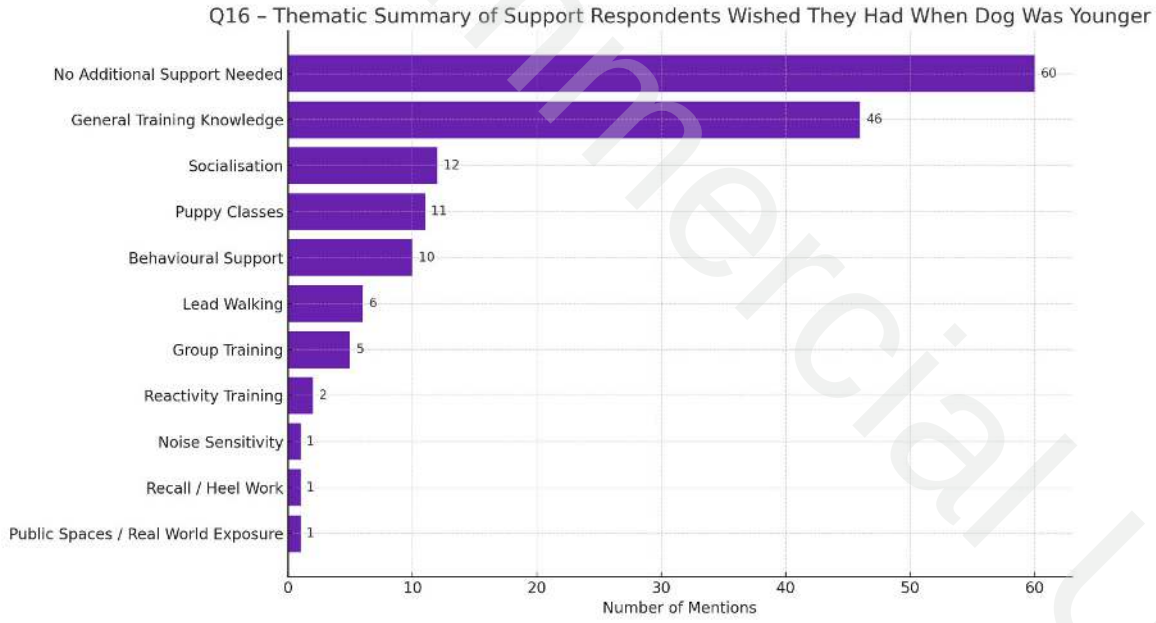
Closely linked, **"Puppy Classes"** were mentioned 11 times. Owners expressed regret that they were unable to attend classes at the right time, often due to lockdowns, limited availability, or lack of awareness. These respondents felt that early exposure to structured training environments would have helped set stronger foundations and prevented some of the challenges they now face. This echoes earlier questions where group training and puppy socialisation classes were among the top desired or most beneficial forms of support.

"Behavioural Support" was raised 10 times, suggesting that for some owners, early signs of fear, anxiety or other challenges were present but not properly understood until later. This also supports trends seen in Q9 and Q13, where a smaller number of dogs had been formally diagnosed with behavioural issues, but many more were described as anxious or reactive. For these respondents, earlier access to knowledgeable behavioural advice could have prevented escalation or allowed for early intervention.

There were also smaller clusters of responses identifying needs for **“Lead Walking”** support (6), **“Group Training”**sessions (5), **“Reactivity Training”** (2), and support for **“Noise Sensitivity”**, **“Recall / Heel Work”**, and **“Public Spaces or Real World Exposure”** (1 each). These categories reflect more specific concerns that became apparent as the dog matured, with some owners noting that early gaps in these areas led to difficulties with focus, over-excitement, or environmental reactivity later on.

In conclusion, while a notable portion of owners felt that no additional support was needed, the thematic spread of the remaining responses paints a clear picture that many owners would have appreciated more guidance in areas such as general training structure, socialisation, and foundational puppy classes. When triangulated with the other survey responses, it becomes evident that early intervention, accessible training support, and better awareness of developmental needs could make a substantial difference in the long-term behaviour and wellbeing of dogs.

Q16 – Supporting Chart (Thematic Interpretation to 'If there’s anything you wish you’d had more support with when your dog was younger, what would it be?' answers)



Chapter 5 – Discussion

Overview of Data and Participant Profile

The dataset for this study was based on 134 responses, collected via an online survey shared across dog-owning and training-focused communities, particularly through Facebook groups. This method of data collection shaped the demographic of responses, with a notable over-representation of individuals who actively participate in dog sports or structured training, such as agility and obedience. This was reflected in the breed profile, where working breeds like Border Collies and Working Cockers appeared most frequently. While the data set was diverse, it is important to note this trend as it may influence generalisability.

Most respondents acquired their dogs between 2020 and 2021, during or immediately after the initial COVID-19 lockdown periods. This time frame is key, as it corresponds directly with social restrictions and limited access to training classes, group socialisation or routine vet visits. Dogs acquired during this period formed the primary subject base for the behavioural and socialisation trends explored throughout the remainder of the questionnaire.

Early Socialisation Patterns and Impact of COVID-19 Restrictions

The data strongly supports the conclusion that COVID-19 restrictions significantly altered the ability of many owners to provide comprehensive early socialisation. In Q6, while over 70 percent of dogs had some form of interaction with other dogs and people, a much smaller portion had consistent exposure to children, visitors at home, or structured training classes. This varied exposure has long-term consequences, as early developmental windows are critical for setting behavioural expectations and confidence in novel situations.

Q7 and Q11 further reinforced this. A clear majority of respondents acknowledged that lockdown restrictions limited their ability to provide the kind of early experiences they would otherwise have considered essential. Additionally, several free-text responses in Q12 and Q13 made explicit mention of the difficulty accessing training support or social environments. The broader implication here is that the lack of early structured exposure has led to observable behavioural issues, particularly in environments where dogs are overstimulated or lack familiarity.

Behavioural Observations and Prevalence

When owners were asked in Q8 to identify common behaviours observed in their dogs, a range of concerns were identified. Reactivity to other dogs and people, fear of handling and guarding behaviours within the home were among the most frequently reported. These observations are consistent with known outcomes of limited or poor early socialisation. A lack of varied, positive experiences during formative months often leads to increased arousal or wariness in novel environments, and this trend was clearly present in the survey data.

It is notable that while only a small number of owners (Q9) had received a formal behavioural diagnosis for their dogs, far more reported observing moderate to severe behaviours on a regular basis. This highlights a disconnect between experienced behavioural issues and access to or recognition of professional behavioural support. Many owners may not recognise early signs of concern or may not feel confident seeking formal behavioural advice unless the issue becomes unmanageable.

This misalignment is an important finding in itself. It points to a need for greater public education around early signs of anxiety, reactivity or fear, as well as better pathways for owners to seek support early rather than waiting until issues are more firmly established.

Training Support Accessed and Its Effectiveness

Q10 showed that a significant number of respondents had engaged with a dog trainer at some point, though fewer had worked with a behaviourist. The distinction between these roles was explained within the question, suggesting that most respondents had a clear understanding of their purpose. Despite this, nearly 34 percent of participants had never worked with either.

This is consistent with earlier questions where respondents expressed a lack of access or hesitancy around training options. It is possible that geographical barriers, cost, or unclear guidance around choosing qualified support were contributing factors. Several qualitative responses across Q13 and Q14 specifically mentioned poor early experiences with trainers or a lack of clarity on where to turn for help, particularly for breed-specific or behaviourally complex dogs.

Where support had been accessed, agility was mentioned frequently as a confidence-building outlet. However, it is worth recognising that this trend may again be linked to the demographic who answered the survey. The responses may have been disproportionately skewed by participation in groups where agility and dog sports are more common. This should be considered when interpreting the weight of these findings.

Ongoing Support Needs and Owner Perspectives

Questions 14 and 15 explored what support had helped owners most and what they now felt they needed. These responses revealed interesting contrasts. While general training and structured support were seen as most helpful, many owners also expressed a need for more emotional and confidence-related guidance, either for their dog or themselves.

There was a recurring theme that owners valued support which allowed them to understand their dog as an individual and work at a pace appropriate to their development. This is consistent with contemporary models of training that focus on consent-based methods and avoiding one-size-fits-all protocols. However, some owners highlighted that such training was not always accessible, especially outside urban centres or online communities.

A notable proportion of respondents also mentioned that they had never received any support and did not feel they needed it. This response ties back to the 60 participants in Q16 who reported no gaps in earlier support. This finding aligns with some of the behavioural outcomes seen in Q8, where mild issues were often present but not always addressed. It could suggest either a higher-than-average owner knowledge base in this sample, or alternatively, a gap in recognising when issues might benefit from early intervention.

Thematic Findings from Qualitative Responses

Free-text responses provided rich insight into the individual experiences of dog owners. Thematic analysis was used to code and group responses across Q12 through Q16. A dominant theme throughout was a desire for more structured puppy classes, more confident socialisation advice, and improved guidance in recognising and addressing emerging behaviour.

Socialisation was consistently mentioned across multiple questions. Many respondents wished they had introduced their dog to a wider variety of experiences, including real-world exposure such as visiting cafés, town centres or public spaces. Several mentioned missed opportunities due to lockdown, but others pointed to limited knowledge or inconsistent advice.

Another important theme was the value of group training, not only for the dogs but for the owners' confidence. Owners described feeling isolated, unsure, or lacking direction. In many cases, they suggested that better early advice or community-based training could have made a meaningful difference. Confidence, both human and canine, appeared as a repeated thread that linked many categories of perceived training success.

There was also a clear appreciation for reward-based, games-focused training, with some participants citing specific methodologies such as shaping, recall games and consent-based handling as especially impactful. This highlights the growing preference for modern training methods, particularly among engaged or experienced owners.

Discussion in Context of Existing Literature

The patterns observed in this study strongly reflect findings from the current literature. The importance of early socialisation is well documented and considered one of the most critical factors influencing behavioural stability (Appleby et al., 2002). Dogs who do not receive positive and varied experiences during the early sensitive period are more likely to develop behavioural issues later in life. This was echoed clearly in responses across this survey.

Studies such as McMillan et al. (2021) have also examined the effects of pandemic-related limitations on pet development. Their findings indicated that dogs raised during this period showed increased anxiety and reduced social resilience. This aligns directly with the data collected, especially in relation to lockdown-acquired dogs.

Furthermore, research by Blackwell et al. (2008) and Casey et al. (2014) support the notion that access to qualified behavioural advice is often underutilised, with many owners relying instead on online sources or peer advice. These habits were reflected in Q14 and Q15, where multiple respondents reported drawing on friends, social media or self-study rather than seeking formal training.

Practical Implications for Dog Trainers and Behaviour Professionals

This study highlights several key areas where trainers and behaviour professionals can help to bridge the gap between owner intention and accessible support. First, it is evident that many owners want more structured guidance, particularly at the early stages. Providing clear, accessible education on what socialisation should look like and how to carry it out safely could help prevent many of the issues observed.

Second, trainers should recognise that many owners feel overwhelmed or unsure about how to begin. Including clear follow-ups, video materials and calm spaces in which to practise could help reduce barriers to engagement. This is especially true in rural or remote areas, where access to in-person group classes may be limited.

Third, it would be beneficial for professionals to promote recognition of subtle behaviour cues that could suggest discomfort or early fear-based learning. Owners are more likely to intervene effectively if they are taught how to spot these behaviours early.

Finally, there is value in strengthening the bridge between training and behavioural services. Many owners do not distinguish between these roles until a problem has become more pronounced. By working collaboratively and promoting cohesive advice, professionals can reduce confusion and ensure owners are more likely to seek the right support early.

Limitations of the Study and Areas for Future Research

This study was primarily limited by its sample size and distribution method. The survey was shared online and attracted a specific audience, many of whom already participate in dog sports or training communities. As a result, the findings may not be fully representative of the wider dog-owning population.

Additionally, because the survey relied on owner self-reporting, it is possible that certain behaviours were under or over-reported. There may also have been bias in how respondents interpreted the questions, particularly in areas where they lacked experience or formal understanding.

Future research could focus on expanding this study across a broader demographic, including a higher proportion of first-time dog owners, those with limited training access, or individuals with rescue dogs. It would also be beneficial to track development and behavioural outcomes over time, particularly in dogs raised during pandemic conditions.

Further qualitative research could explore how owners understand behaviour terminology, where they go for information, and how advice impacts their choices. Understanding this pathway may help shape more accessible and impactful public education strategies.

In summary, this chapter brings together the key findings from the data and situates them within the broader context of canine behaviour literature. It highlights the ongoing need for clear, early support for owners and reinforces the importance of modern, practical, and emotionally aware training solutions that benefit both the dog and the person behind the lead.

Chapter 6 – Recommendations

The findings of this study have highlighted several areas where support, education and practical interventions are necessary to improve behavioural outcomes in dogs who experienced limited socialisation or routine during the COVID-19 pandemic. These recommendations are designed with both the individual dog and their handler in mind and are aimed at helping prevent similar issues in future global events where everyday life is disrupted.

The data clearly indicates that while many dogs have adapted well, a significant number are still struggling with behaviours linked to reduced early experiences. The most commonly reported challenges included reactivity to other dogs, fear or nervousness around people, handling sensitivity and difficulties with exposure to new environments. These were often linked to missed or limited socialisation opportunities during a critical development window. Therefore, the first recommendation is the development and promotion of **structured early socialisation support** for all new puppy owners.

This support should be practical, accessible and consistent. One option could be the creation of a free online socialisation and early development hub for owners, particularly targeting those bringing home puppies during periods of lockdown or restriction. The hub should provide weekly guides for building positive experiences, video demonstrations of gradual exposure exercises, and clear explanations about puppy development. Content must also recognise the varying needs of different breeds and temperaments and avoid generalisations. This would help guide owners who may not have access to classes or local trainers during periods of disruption, offering them a practical roadmap through their dog's early development.

It is also recommended that **training professionals and organisations adapt their offerings** to ensure that basic life skills and social learning can continue even during times of national or local restrictions. For example, trainers should be encouraged and supported to provide interactive online puppy and adolescent dog classes. These must include live demonstrations, interactive Q&A sessions, and personalised guidance rather than pre-recorded sessions alone. Online formats cannot replace real-world learning entirely, but they can still support handlers in understanding body language, learning theory, and reinforcing behaviours like recall, handling, and calmness in controlled ways.

The inclusion of **puppy preparation programmes for prospective owners** could also be key. Many of the survey participants reflected that they would not have acquired a dog if they had known how difficult early socialisation would be during lockdown. Others commented that they were first-time owners with little understanding of how to train or prepare a dog for life beyond the home. Targeted preparation materials for prospective owners, ideally delivered through veterinary practices, breeder partnerships and reputable welfare organisations, could help owners feel more informed before committing.

Another recommendation is the **expansion of targeted support for COVID-generation dogs**, particularly those now aged between two and four years who may still be struggling. Many of these dogs have missed the opportunity to be gradually and positively introduced to group settings or public environments. There is a clear opportunity here to provide specialised remedial classes or workshops for adolescent and adult dogs that focuses on core foundations like handler focus, engagement in busy places, loose lead walking and learning to settle around distractions.

These classes should not be framed as failure or catch-up but rather as tailored opportunities for learning. They should also offer built-in flexibility, including one-to-one support where group settings might be too overwhelming. The inclusion of written follow-ups and access to online materials, as shown in your own practice, would ensure owners feel supported beyond the class environment.

The survey responses also highlighted a need for more **accessible behavioural support**. Some owners expressed frustration at not being able to find the right support locally, and others indicated that early behavioural signs were missed or misunderstood. This points to a need for clearer pathways between veterinarians and accredited behaviour professionals. In times of global disruption, these referral routes should be made more prominent and more responsive. For example, a national directory of behaviourists willing to provide remote consults or initial support online could help owners feel that support is available even when movement is restricted.

A separate but related area of focus must be on **raising awareness around pain-related behavioural changes**, particularly in young dogs. Several survey participants noted that behaviours assumed to be fear or reactivity were later attributed to underlying pain. Education on this link should be made more widespread across both general pet-owning audiences and frontline professionals. Vets, trainers, and behaviourists should work collaboratively to assess behaviour holistically, especially in pandemic-era dogs where regular vet access may have been disrupted during critical growth stages.

For future planning, the findings also strongly support the **development of an emergency canine welfare strategy**. This should be created at a national level and involve welfare organisations, training associations, veterinary representatives and animal charities. Its aim would be to ensure that should future lockdowns, pandemics, or similar crises occur, dog welfare is built into the public health response from the beginning. This could include access to outdoor training space, the prioritisation of dog welfare services in essential categories, and continued public messaging about the behavioural importance of social contact and structured routines for dogs.

The emergency plan should also include **protocols for breeders and rescue organisations**, especially in terms of how puppies and rehomed dogs are prepared and supported if the usual levels of exposure and handling are not possible. Breeders could be offered simple templates for sensory and social enrichment during lockdowns, and rehoming centres should consider increasing post-adoption behavioural support and check-ins if face-to-face handovers are limited.

A final recommendation, based on the positive impact of agility and other sports-based training reported by many respondents, is the **continued promotion of enrichment and purpose-driven activities**. Activities like mantrailing, scentwork, agility and obedience provide structure, predictability, and mental stimulation. These are essential for dogs who may have struggled with lack of variety or limited interaction during their developmental window. They also help improve relationships between dogs and their handlers and often lead to improvements in reactivity, frustration tolerance and general engagement.

Owners should be encouraged to explore these activities not just as sports but as a normal part of raising a confident and well-adjusted dog. Resources, clubs and online training opportunities should be promoted and made as accessible as possible to a wider audience, not just those already involved in the sport or competition scene.

In summary, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Develop an online early socialisation and puppy development hub with practical weekly guidance.
- Expand remote and hybrid class offerings for puppies and adolescents during public health disruptions.
- Provide pre-adoption and puppy preparation materials via veterinary, breeder and rescue networks.
- Offer targeted remedial training workshops for adolescent and young adult dogs affected by lockdown.
- Promote improved veterinary-behavioural referral networks and shared education around pain-linked behaviour.
- Create a national emergency canine welfare strategy to ensure support during future global disruptions.
- Support breeders and rehoming centres in providing enrichment and adaptation during lockdown periods.
- Encourage everyday engagement with structured activities and sports-based training as a form of enrichment.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a lasting impact on the way many dogs have grown up and developed. These recommendations aim to ensure that those dogs are supported into adulthood, that their owners are empowered with relevant resources, and that future disruptions can be better planned for in a way that protects dog welfare across all sectors.

Chapter 7 – Ethical Considerations

Conducting research that involves people sharing their experiences and opinions about their dogs requires a thoughtful and respectful approach. This study was carried out with a commitment to upholding ethical principles throughout the process, ensuring that all participants were treated with fairness, transparency and confidentiality.

All responses to the survey were submitted anonymously. Participants were not asked for their names or personal identifiers, and the data was stored securely. The questionnaire was shared online through selected dog-related social media groups. These groups were chosen because their members were likely to have direct experience with the subject being explored. The post included a brief introduction explaining the nature of the research, the purpose of the study and how the responses would be used. It was made clear that participation was entirely voluntary and that respondents could choose not to answer any question.

It was also important that participants understood their involvement carried no risk or obligation. To achieve this, the survey introduction avoided complex language or academic terminology. Instead, the tone remained warm and easy to understand. The intention was to make the process accessible and welcoming to everyone, regardless of whether they had previous experience in participating in research. The survey was kept open for a reasonable period of time to allow people to respond when it suited them.

Respecting the emotional nature of some of the responses was also a key consideration. Several of the questions asked participants to reflect on their dog's upbringing, behavioural challenges or regrets they may have had during their training journeys. These topics can bring up feelings of guilt, sadness or frustration. Care was taken to frame the questions sensitively and with empathy. Where applicable, follow-up materials and comments acknowledged that no dog trainer or owner gets everything right, and that learning is always a part of the process.

Another area of ethical importance was the use of participant responses in the final reporting. Any thematic analysis or quotes were used in a way that protects anonymity and does not allow individuals to be identified. While direct responses were sometimes paraphrased or summarised to illustrate key themes, care was taken not to alter their meaning or tone. The value of each person's insight was recognised, regardless of whether it aligned with mainstream views or not.

It is also worth noting that the study did not involve dogs directly. No physical assessments or observations were carried out, and there was no interaction between the researcher and the animals discussed. All information was self-reported by the owners or handlers, based on their lived experience. This ensured there was no risk of causing distress or disruption to the dogs themselves.

In terms of data handling, all responses were collected through Google Forms, which allowed for secure storage and ease of access. The data was then downloaded and analysed on a password-protected system. The researcher is aware of GDPR considerations and no personal data was collected that could be used to trace individual participants.

An additional ethical factor that emerged during the analysis phase was the importance of honouring the diversity of opinions. While this project is based on positive reinforcement and science-backed training, not all responses followed these principles. Some participants shared experiences of traditional or punitive training methods. These responses were not excluded but instead recognised as part of the wider picture. Highlighting them allows the report to reflect a more balanced reality, particularly in areas such as rural Ireland where older styles of training are still more widely practised.

Finally, it is worth reflecting on the emotional impact this research had on the researcher. Reading about dogs who missed key social experiences due to lockdowns, or who were misunderstood in their early years was difficult at times. However, these stories also gave strength to the purpose of the study. They reminded us why ethical and well-informed training support is essential and why awareness and empathy must always sit at the heart of our work with dogs and their people.

This chapter confirms that the research was conducted with care, honesty and ethical responsibility. Every participant who took the time to complete the survey contributed to something meaningful and their voices were heard with the respect they deserve.

Chapter 8 – Limitations

As with any study of this nature, there are limitations that must be acknowledged in order to interpret the findings with appropriate care and context. While this research aimed to collect valuable insights into the socialisation and behavioural development of dogs raised during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, certain factors restricted the breadth and depth of the data, as well as the generalisability of the conclusions.

One of the primary limitations of this study lies in the **sampling method**. The majority of responses were gathered via Facebook groups, particularly those dedicated to dog sports such as agility and obedience. As a result, the respondent group may not accurately represent the broader dog-owning population. Many participants were highly engaged owners, some of whom were trainers or behaviourists themselves. This potentially skews the findings towards a more experienced and proactive demographic, where issues such as early socialisation and behavioural training are already prioritised. While their insights were extremely valuable, it is important to recognise that this population might differ significantly from more casual or inexperienced dog owners.

Additionally, the study **did not require or collect data on certain variables** that could have enriched the analysis. For example, we did not gather information about the **age of neutering**, which would have been useful when assessing the impact of early neutering on behaviour and social development. Similarly, the survey did not include detailed timelines of when certain behaviours first emerged or how long they persisted, making it difficult to draw conclusions about progression or resolution over time. There was also no question about how many dogs within a household might be influencing each other, which could be relevant when considering behavioural modelling.

Another limitation is found in the **design of the survey questions** themselves. While open-ended responses provided rich qualitative data, the lack of follow-up questions or structured interviews meant that we were reliant on the depth and clarity of each participant's response. Some answers were brief or ambiguous, which made accurate thematic grouping more challenging. Although basic thematic analysis was used to group answers into recurring themes, the interpretation of this qualitative data may still carry some level of subjectivity. In future, a mixed-method approach that includes interviews or case studies could help to fill in these gaps and provide more nuanced understanding.

The survey also relied entirely on **self-reporting**, which introduces the possibility of **recall bias** or selective memory. Respondents may have unintentionally underreported or overreported behaviours, particularly when reflecting on their dog's early life or behaviours that have since improved or worsened. There is also the possibility that owners may frame their answers in a way that reflects positively on their own efforts, rather than presenting a strictly neutral or objective account of their dog's behaviour.

Another area to consider is the **lack of demographic data** on the respondents themselves. We did not ask for geographical location beyond the general understanding that many were based in Ireland or the UK, and we did not capture owner age, experience level, or access to training resources. This information could have provided further insights into the types of support owners were able to access and whether certain issues were more prevalent in specific locations or groups.

In addition, **the survey was only conducted in English**, which could limit participation from non-native English speakers or individuals outside of the UK and Ireland who might still have had valuable input to contribute. This inherently narrows the diversity of the sample and the cultural context in which dogs are raised and trained. It is also possible that terminology used within the questions (for example, the distinction between a behaviourist and a trainer) may have been interpreted differently by some participants despite the brief clarification provided.

A final consideration is the influence of **social desirability bias**, especially in questions asking about the use of behaviourists or types of training methods. Some owners may have felt reluctant to admit to using punitive methods or to not seeking professional help, even though the survey was anonymous. This could have skewed the results and underrepresented the prevalence of certain practices.

Despite these limitations, the data collected offers valuable insights into common themes and shared experiences among dog owners during a challenging period. The richness of the open-ended responses, paired with the range of quantitative data, allows for meaningful interpretation and points towards areas where further research and structured support could be beneficial. Moving forward, these limitations should be used as a guide for refining both the survey approach and the research design in future studies. Including broader and more diverse populations, enhancing the structure of the questions, and incorporating longitudinal data collection would all improve the strength and applicability of the findings.

Chapter 9 – Conclusion

This research set out to explore the long-term behavioural impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on dogs and their owners, with a particular focus on early socialisation, access to training, and the availability of professional support. Drawing from 134 survey responses, we examined a wide range of experiences across multiple breeds and household contexts. The overarching goal was to determine whether dogs that were raised during or immediately after the peak of the pandemic exhibited different behavioural patterns compared to dogs raised outside of that time frame, and if so, what kind of support owners felt they needed then and now. The responses paint a vivid and sometimes challenging picture of what it was like to raise a dog during such a globally disruptive period.

What emerged very clearly is that the COVID-19 pandemic had an undeniable influence on the socialisation opportunities for dogs, particularly during their critical early development stages. Repeated references to lockdowns, restrictions on movement, closure of training classes and lack of exposure to normal life events were prevalent throughout the survey. Many owners expressed regret about what their dogs had missed in those formative months and the lasting effect this has had on their behaviour. Some dogs have developed heightened anxiety, reactivity or overexcitement, while others have missed out on valuable life skills such as being calm in busy environments or interacting appropriately with people and other dogs. The pandemic did not just limit what owners could access – it shaped the very environments dogs were exposed to, making it impossible for some to have the kind of foundation that is typically recommended for well-rounded canine behaviour.

One key finding that runs through the survey is the significant role that early experiences play in long-term behaviour. Many respondents identified that if they could go back, they would prioritise more socialisation, more structured training, and better exposure to new places, people and animals. The lack of these experiences appears to be closely tied to some of the more difficult behaviours that owners are now facing. For example, dogs who were never used to being left alone during lockdown are now struggling with separation anxiety. Others who did not have the chance to interact with other dogs in a managed environment now display signs of frustration or reactivity on walks. These outcomes support existing research that highlights how crucial the early weeks and months are for shaping a dog's behavioural outlook and ability to cope with everyday challenges.

It was particularly interesting to see the variety of training methods and approaches that respondents had used to manage or improve behaviour. Agility training, in particular, was cited frequently as a confidence-building activity, and it was clear that many dogs had benefitted greatly from structured outlets that allowed for both physical and mental stimulation. However, the data must be interpreted with the understanding that many survey respondents were drawn from communities where dog sports such as agility, obedience and scentwork are already popular. This may have created a bias towards responses that favour these activities. Nevertheless, the consistency with which these approaches were mentioned suggests that structured, engaging activities continue to play a critical role in helping dogs develop focus, confidence and resilience.

Another notable insight was the extent to which owners still feel they lack support, particularly when it comes to understanding and managing behaviour. Even among experienced dog owners and those who had worked with trainers or behaviourists, there was a clear desire for more accessible, tailored support. Respondents highlighted the need for more group classes, better access to qualified professionals, clearer information on breed-specific behaviours and better general guidance on canine behaviour. For dogs with ongoing behavioural challenges, many owners expressed that a one-off session was not enough and that they valued ongoing help that could adapt as their dog's needs evolved. This reflects broader discussions in the dog training world about the value of ongoing support rather than quick fixes.

The thematic analysis of qualitative responses also highlighted several critical points. Many owners spoke about having to work things out themselves due to a lack of access to suitable training or advice during the lockdowns. Some turned to online resources or communities, which proved helpful to varying degrees, but this experience was inconsistent. Others had negative experiences with training approaches that did not suit their dogs, underscoring the importance of finding the right fit between dog, owner and training style. The survey responses reinforced the view that training is not one-size-fits-all and that both dogs and owners benefit from flexible, supportive and understanding approaches that focus on their unique circumstances.

In terms of behavioural trends, the survey revealed a concerning but important pattern regarding the number of dogs that displayed heightened reactivity, overexcitement, anxiety or general nervousness. Some of these behaviours were attributed to the limitations placed on early socialisation, but others pointed to deeper issues such as pain or discomfort. A few owners shared experiences where reactivity had been wrongly diagnosed as behavioural when it was later discovered to be pain-related. These insights suggest a need for increased awareness and education around the role that physical health plays in behaviour. This includes equipping trainers, behaviourists and owners with the tools to recognise signs of pain and refer appropriately when medical causes are suspected.

Another theme that stood out was the variability in how owners interpreted and accessed professional support. While some had excellent experiences with behaviourists and trainers, others were disappointed by the advice given or felt that the training offered did not meet their needs. This inconsistency points to the ongoing challenge of regulating and standardising dog training and behavioural support. In some parts of the world, access to high-quality professional help remains patchy.

Importantly, the survey also identified many positive outcomes and resilience among both dogs and owners. Despite the challenges, many respondents shared stories of dogs who had adapted well, developed new skills or come a long way through patient, consistent work. The bond between dog and owner often came through strongly, particularly among those who had sought help or invested time into activities like agility or scentwork. The success of these cases demonstrates that while the early experiences of a COVID-era puppy may not have been ideal, much can still be done to build confidence, address behavioural issues and support wellbeing.

In summary, the findings of this study highlight several key conclusions. First, early socialisation and structured experiences are crucial for long-term behavioural health in dogs, and the pandemic severely limited access to these experiences. Second, while many owners did their best to adapt, there is still a significant need for better support, more accessible training options and broader public awareness around canine behaviour. Third, owners benefit greatly from structured outlets such as dog sports, particularly those that strengthen the dog-owner relationship and support confidence building. And finally, the training and behaviour support landscape remains uneven, with significant differences in access, quality and cultural attitudes toward dogs.

The research question, "What are the lasting behavioural impacts of COVID-19 on dogs, and how can we better support owners going forward?" can be answered by saying that the pandemic has indeed created gaps in early development for many dogs, and those gaps have translated into behavioural challenges that persist years later. While many owners have found their own ways to support their dogs, whether through agility, online learning or sheer persistence, the need for better infrastructure and support remains. Future efforts should focus on making high-quality, science-based training and behavioural advice more widely available, especially in rural or underserved areas. There is also a need to prepare more robust contingency plans for future events that could disrupt access to early socialisation and training, ensuring that no generation of dogs is left unsupported again.

Above all, this study has shown the remarkable dedication that many dog owners have to their dogs' wellbeing. Their willingness to reflect on past experiences, share honestly and work towards better outcomes is a powerful reminder that with the right support, dogs and owners can navigate even the most difficult of circumstances together.

Appendix A: Survey Questionnaire Used in Data Collection

To support the aims of this research, an online survey was developed to gather both quantitative and qualitative data from dog owners who acquired their dogs between 2019 and 2022. The survey included a combination of multiple-choice and open-ended questions, allowing participants to reflect on their dog’s early life experiences, behaviour, training history, and the type of support they received or wished they had received. The questions were carefully designed to explore the potential impacts of limited socialisation opportunities due to the COVID-19 pandemic, while also offering insight into owners’ perceptions and lived experiences. The survey remained anonymous, and participants were invited to answer all questions as fully and honestly as they felt comfortable.

The questions asked in Survey were:
Q1 - What year did you get your dog?
Q2 - How old was your dog when you brought them home?
Q3 - Where did your dog come from?
Q4 - What breed or type is your dog?
Q5 - Is your dog neutered/spayed?
Q6 - During the first 6 months you had your dog, how much exposure did they get to the following? (Tick all that apply)
Q7 - Were there any restrictions at the time that made socialisation more difficult?
If you answers yes to Q7, please explain briefly
Q8 - Which of the following behaviours do you regularly notice in your dog? (Tick all that apply)
If you answered yes to Q9, please specify

Q10 - Have you worked with a trainer or behaviourist?
Q11 - Do you feel your dog missed out on early experiences because of lockdown or restrictions?
Q12 - How would you describe your dog's general behaviour or temperament in one or two sentences?
Q13 - If you could go back and change or add anything to your dog's early experiences, what would it be?
Q14 - What type of support, advice, or training has helped you most (if any)?
Q15 - What kind of support do you feel would help you most now? (Tick all that apply)
Q16 - If there's anything you wish you'd had more support with when your dog was younger, what would it be?

Appendix B: Ethics Statement Regarding Anonymised Responses

This research project adhered strictly to ethical principles throughout the data collection, analysis and reporting process. Survey participants were informed that their responses would remain anonymous and confidential, and that no personally identifiable information would be collected or published. As part of the questionnaire, several open-ended questions invited participants to share their experiences in more detail. While these responses were crucial in helping to shape the thematic analysis and identify patterns across the data, the raw individual answers have not been included in this document. This decision was made to uphold the ethical obligation to protect participant anonymity. Even in the absence of names, some comments could potentially be identifiable due to specific circumstances or the nature of the information shared. Instead of publishing full text responses, this thesis presents aggregate data, thematic summaries and charts that reflect the broader trends without compromising individual confidentiality. This approach is consistent with ethical guidelines for research involving human participants and ensures that all contributors are treated with respect and privacy. By omitting individual verbatim quotes, the research maintains its commitment to transparency, academic rigour and participant protection.

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