



# EARLY EDUCATION & IMPROVING YOUR CHANCES OF RACING SUCCESS FACT SHEET



From the moment a greyhound pup opens its eyes and begins to move around its environment, it is learning about the world in which it lives.



Learning about their environment, what things they need to seek out, ignore and avoid; and what behaviours are acceptable, or not acceptable, the pups are creating a 'rulebook' for life.

## WHEN IS THE BEST TIME FOR MY GREYHOUND TO CREATE ITS RULEBOOK?

The best time for a young greyhound to fill its rulebook is between 3 and 20 weeks of age because this is the period of its life when it is a full rulebook helps a growing pup (and carries through to adulthood) know how to respond to different environments and events and allows it to focus and ignore all the unimportant things that come across, much like humans do.

This is very important for race-day. The fuller a greyhound's rulebook is, the more likely they are to be able concentrate on chasing the lure, rather than being distracted by, or becoming nervous in, the race-day environment.

## WHY IS A FULL RULEBOOK IMPORTANT?

Having a full rulebook allows your greyhound to focus on things they want to seek out (such as chasing a lure because it is fun) and ignore all the other distractions.

Being exposed to lots of different things in a positive way, creates greyhounds that are generally more approachable, behaviourally more stable, and able to cope in a range of different situations. For example, entering a car or kennel block for the first time, a trial track, or the race-day environment.

## WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A GREYHOUND'S RULEBOOK IS 'EMPTY'?

A greyhound with a relatively empty rulebook is likely to find many things challenging:

- it will struggle to adapt to a kennel environment;
- their fear response can inhibit or block their chase motivation, making them difficult to break in; and

- even if they break-in, fear and distraction at the race track is likely to impact on their racing success.

## WHY WOULD A GREYHOUND BE FEARFUL OF NEW THINGS?

Fear responses keep animals safe, as they are a survival mechanism. Every animal is born with the inbuilt requirement to learn very early in life about their environment - to create their rulebook. Early exposure to different and new stimuli teaches the young animal about what to seek out, what to avoid, and what to ignore.

The young animal's brain is only able to do this easily for a short period of time, and for all dog breeds (including greyhounds) this is mainly between 3 and 20 weeks of age.

After this time, the pup relies on the rules in its rulebook to respond to changes in the environment, and this happens throughout the rest of its life. If there is no rule for something new, they will use the rule that is closest, which may or may not

be a fear response. This is a key survival mechanism.

## WOULDN'T A FEARFUL DOG RUN FASTER?

No. There is a lot of evidence in the scientific literature, particularly in brain studies, that shows the parts of the brain that are used when a dog is engaged in chasing or prey drive are not the parts of the brain it uses when it is fearful. In fact, when fear responses are triggered, many other parts of the brain can be inhibited or blocked as a survival mechanism.

## WHAT ARE THE SIGNS THAT MY GREYHOUND'S RULEBOOK IS EMPTY?

Greyhounds with an empty rulebook can appear nervous, distracted, or unable to settle. If there are too many stimuli, the greyhound may become overwhelmed and start doing odd things like constantly drinking or licking, bopping up and down, lip quivering, chewing on bedding etc. Some people call these greyhounds "unsocialised".

## WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I THINK MY GREYHOUND'S RULEBOOK IS RELATIVELY EMPTY?

While the best time to create rules in your greyhound's rulebook is early in their life, it is not impossible to create new rules later in life or change rules that are already there. It is just much more difficult and requires time and patience.

In this situation, you should start to slowly expose your greyhound to a range of different stimuli (things in the environment) in a positive way. This will fill their rulebook with rules about stimuli they should not fear; the sorts of stimuli they want to seek out

(for food or fun), and the sorts of stimuli to ignore - a bit like you would ignore a tree in the background.

## WHAT SORT OF THINGS SHOULD MY GREYHOUND GET USED TO?

The basic rule is your greyhound should get used to anything that they are likely to come across in their life that should not hurt them. Below is a list of a few things that greyhounds are faced with on race day:

- smells: other dogs, food, people, vehicle exhaust etc;
- noises: loud or strange noises, radio, loudspeaker etc;
- surfaces: feel of different surfaces such as carpet, sand, concrete, bitumen, hot surfaces, metal and rubber;
- motion of a car or trailer;
- crowds of people and other greyhounds;
- movement of banners and flags;
- being examined and handled by multiple strangers;
- confinement to small race day kennels and starting boxes;
- standing on heights such as a vet examination table;
- catching pens.

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*It is important that these things are viewed positively or at the very least ignored by the greyhound to prevent it becoming fearful on race day.*

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## WHAT CAN I DO AT HOME TO HELP FILL A PUP'S RULEBOOK?

There are many things breeders, whelpers and rearers can do in the pup's home environment to fill its rulebook. The basic rule of thumb is to try and recreate similar experiences to those the greyhound will be faced with on race-day, inside the pup's home pen.

Here are some simple ideas that won't cost a lot or require lots of your time:

- Place old starting boxes into rearing pens and sometimes feed the pup there;
- build a ramp that looks like a vet examination table in the rearing pen and place bones, food or other enrichment items on it to encourage the pup to walk up and onto the ramp and be comfortable standing there;
- Tie flags to the fences allowing them to flap in the wind;
- Provide old children's toys and other strange objects in their pen for them to explore and change these regularly;
- Play the radio to give them experience with different sounds;
- Let the pups spend a short amount of time in a race kennel each week - even together as a litter and give them food or a bone to make it fun;
- Where possible, take pups for a walk at the local shops to meet other dogs and be exposed to large groups of people and noise;
- Where possible, introduce pups to a variety of mature small, medium and large dogs in a relaxed setting - these mature dogs will help the pup learn appropriate behaviours for social interactions; and
- Try taking the pups for a drive.