

Puppy confidence course

The puppy confidence course was guided by industry experts and inspired by other working dog organisations, including the Australian Army and Australian Border Force, that require high levels of resilience, confidence, and agility in their dogs.

This project was made possible thanks to our multi-talented team members who successfully collaborated during all phases of planning, design, construction, staff, and volunteer training, and fine-tuning required after roll-out.

Conception

In 2021, it was recognised that there was room for improvement in our colony in the areas of skill development, confidence to explore new stimuli, and proprioception during the early stages of puppy development.

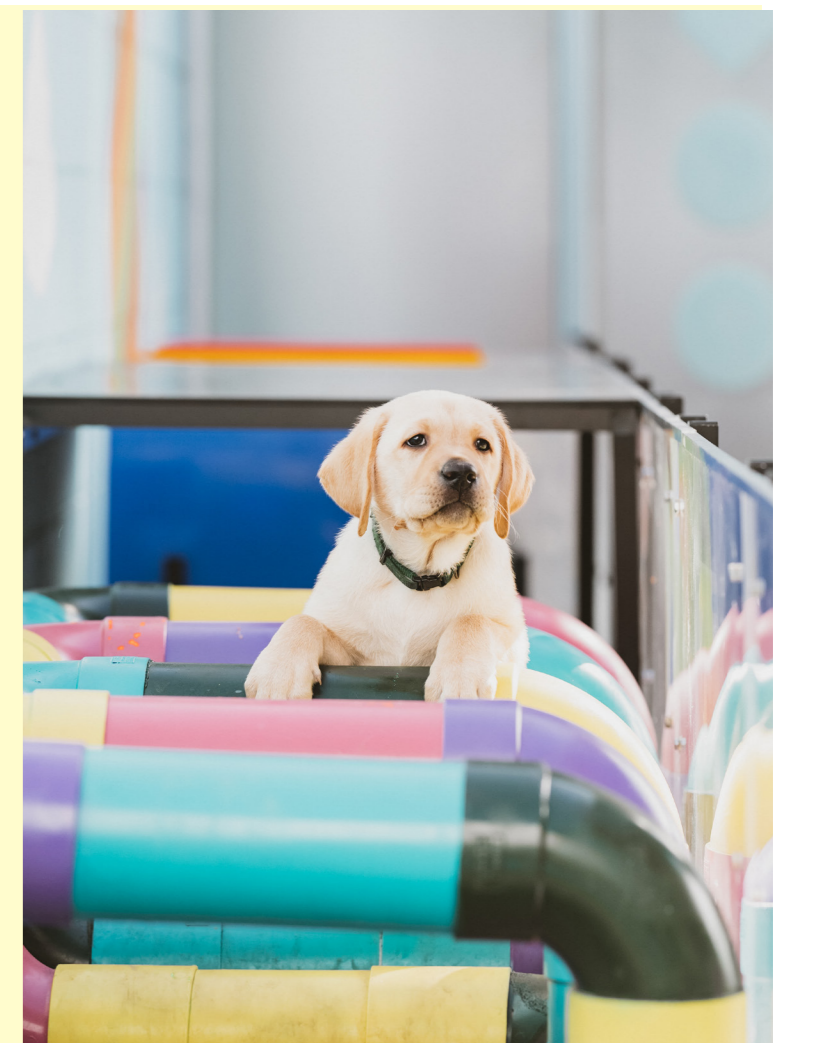
As a result, major plans were made to develop resilience amongst the colony, further increasing each pup's likelihood of success in becoming a Seeing Eye Dog.



Aim

To improve proprioception, resilience, and confidence in the youngest members of our colony while considering the puppy's age and developmental stage.

The overall goal was to improve the success rate of graduating dogs by introducing behaviours essential to becoming a Seeing Eye Dog.



Components

The puppy confidence course required extensive planning to accommodate variable litter ages and developmental stages.

The puppy confidence course has been designed to improve puppies' overall proprioception and confidence by incorporating elements of height, tight spaces, varying surfaces, and sensations of objects in contact with the body.

Proprioception

- Under and over pipes
- Tight spaces
- Ramps
- Stairs
- Unstable platform
- Hanging obstacles

Heights

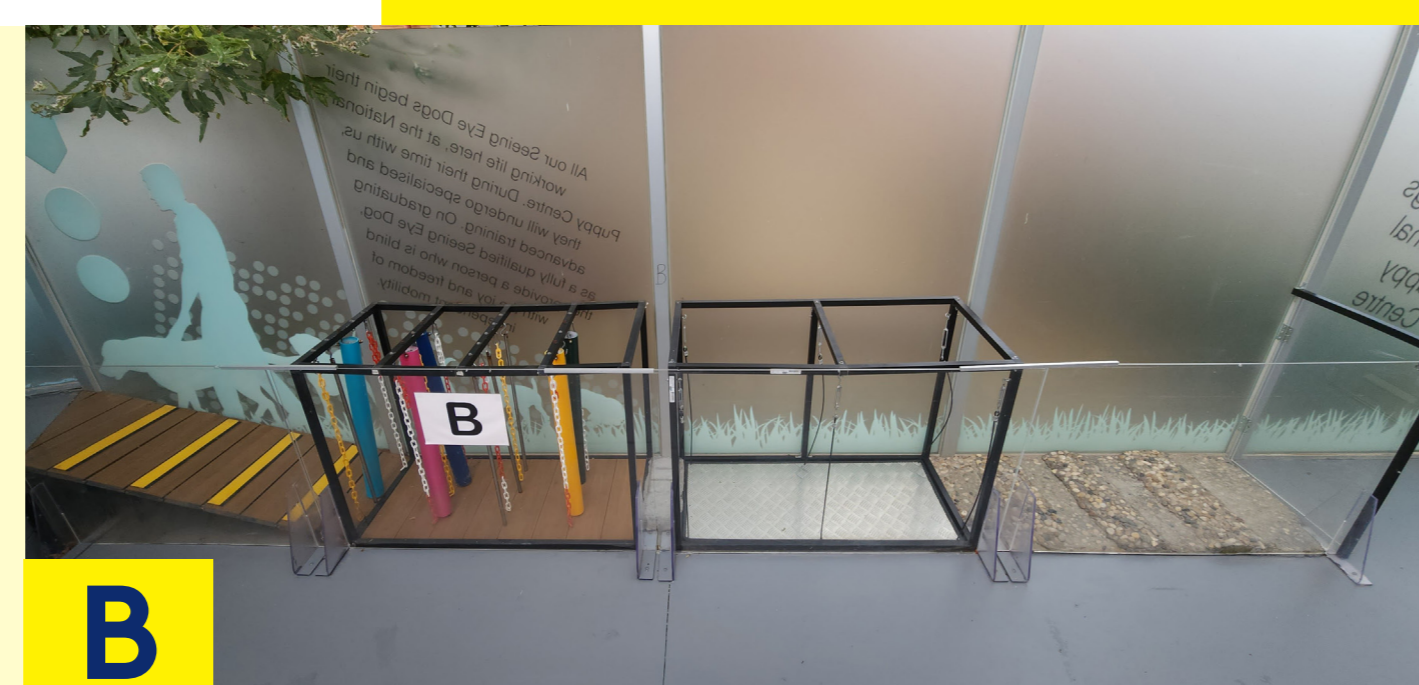
- Stairs
- Clear Perspex platform
- Three-quarters of the course is raised
- Clear Perspex walls on raised sections

Surfaces

- Pebbles and rocks
- Textured steel
- Wooden deck
- Textured 'stepping stones'
- Plastic modular floor coverings



Development and implementation of training plan



- The puppy confidence course is split into four sections (A, B, C1, C2).
- Pups are taught to move through the course using science-based training, incorporating back-chaining and target training methods.
- At five weeks of age, pups are introduced to the course in small groups of two or three.
- Pups explore each section for two or three sessions, starting at section C1, then C2, followed by B.
- The pups are lured with a target stick coated with peanut butter or puppy mousse.
- At six weeks of age, pups are introduced to section A individually or with a littermate if an individual needs extra support.
- Pups receive a food reward after each component in each section and will get lured through sections with treats if required.
- After completion of section A, pups continue through to sections B and C.
- At seven weeks of age, pups continue to go through the course in its entirety from sections A to C and receive a reward after the completion of each section (unless luring is required).
- At eight weeks, pups are typically confident when navigating all sections.
- Staff and volunteers are trained to assess the body language of pups to best support individuals to succeed.
- There is an emphasis on the importance of recognising thresholds and decompression periods to allow opportunities for pups to return to an emotionally productive state after each session.

Lina Xi: puppy development trainer intern

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Ivan Chasemore: maintenance manager

Scan QR code to watch a video about the puppy confidence course.

