

Puppy Socialization

What is it?

Puppies learning how to interact appropriately in social situations with people, dogs, and their environment.

Why is it important?

The goal is to condition your dog to accept the activities of everyday life beyond the security of your home. This learning will make your dog more self-confident, secure, and predictable. *Since behavioral problems are the biggest reason for owner relinquishment of dogs, early socialization and training are essential and can help save the lives of many dogs.* Also, properly socializing your pet can improve your bond with them. It is a fun, active process for both of you.

When should it be done?

The critical social development period for dogs is approximately between 3 and 14 weeks. This is the age that they are most accepting, less cautious, and very curious about their environment. Even though socialization can occur at any age, it will be a slower process for an older dog than for a puppy that is under 14 weeks of age. That's why it is critical that you start early.

How to do it properly: 3 key ideas

1. Provide positive controlled experiences:

A puppy's earliest encounters will shape its behavior throughout life, so make sure that they are *positive*. Always have small treats handy and be ready to reward them for good behavior. From the first day you have your puppy home, get them used to being handled (look in ears, feet, mouth, etc). This will make your groomer and veterinarians' jobs a little easier, as well as save yourself and your dog some stress. During your experiences it is critical to observe your puppy closely for signs of stress: tucked tail; licking lips; yawning; shaking; and ears back. If observed, try to remove the puppy so they are not overwhelmed and don't associate the experience with fear!

2. Multiple, brief encounters:

Aim for 90 different situations that are associated with pleasurable experiences by the time your puppy is 14 weeks old. Keep encounters brief, especially in the beginning, and then as your puppy develops they will become more confident and comfortable for longer experiences.

3. A variety of experiences

Go out of your way to encounter different types of people, places, animals, walking surfaces, noises, and other situations. Give treats to friendly strangers to give to your dog; most people will happily oblige an obedient puppy.

Some Ideas/ Suggestions:

- Enroll in a “puppy preschool” class and start training early.
- Sit on a bench with your puppy, near a school when the kids are coming out
- Take your puppy to a public park where people jog, rollerblade, and ride bikes.
- Show them how fun water can be with a baby pool.
- Take your puppy in the car with you when you run errands or go through the drivethru (don’t do on a full puppy stomach).

Vaccination concerns

The risk of your puppy developing serious behavior problems from being poorly socialized is *far greater* than that of infectious disease. But to be safe, only let your puppy interact with dogs that you know are physically and behaviorally healthy and vaccinated. In addition, don’t let him play in unclean environments, such as dog parks, that may be contaminated with germs from unknown dogs, until he has received all of his vaccinations, usually at 16 weeks.

Please contact your veterinarian for more information about socialization and health care for your new addition.

Further Reading

American Veterinary Society for Animal Behavior, www.avsonline.org

Information courtesy of UC Davis School of Veterinary Medicine Animal Behavior Service