

Socialization: The Key to a Confident Dog:



WHAT IS SOCIALIZATION?

Socialization is a lifelong process that will happen to your dog, if you provide plenty of opportunities for it. It is literally introducing your dog to as many different environments as possible. Dogs that are well socialized are happy, secure, confident dogs, who are healthier because of a general reduction in stress. A well-socialized dog will readily interact with all types of people and will easily play with other dogs as well. He is not afraid of most objects and may be cautious about certain things, like meeting a horse face to face for the first time, but he does not panic and he recovers quite quickly if startled.

Think of your puppy or your older under-socialized dog as a visitor from another planet. They have no idea what a car is for, what a vacuum does, why this man sounds different and looks different than this lady over here. It is up to you to introduce this “visitor” to the human way of life in such a way that instills confidence in them. You are going to interpret the human world for your dog.

WHEN CAN I START THIS SOCIALIZATION?

NOW! Socialization is most critical in puppies between the ages of three weeks and 14 weeks. This is the time when experiences are new. They exert a maximum and long-lasting effect on shaping your dog’s future personality and temperament. Your puppy needs lots of positive exposure to as many different people, places, things, noises, and smells as you can muster. The key word here is POSITIVE exposure. So the sooner you start socializing your puppy the better adjusted he will be when he grows up. Start to use the jolly routine described below to start this important process of socialization.

SO IT IS IMPORTANT FOR PUPPIES TO START SOCIALIZING EARLY, BUT I HAVE AN OLDER DOG THAT IS FEARFUL ... WILL THIS SOCIALIZATION HELP HIM TOO?

YES! Even older dogs that did not get the proper amount of socialization needed when they were puppies can benefit by a proper socialization strategy. It will take an older dog longer to become confident and if he has had some terrible fright in his puppyhood, he may never overcome it, but he can be helped with active, positive socialization. You are going to use the same techniques described below for your older dog as well as your puppy.

THE JOLLY ROUTINE

Your dog sees the world through your attitude. So if you act happy and at ease, your dog will interpret the world as Doggie Disneyland. If you act scared, nervous and hesitant about certain situations, people, objects or noises, then that transfers right down the leash to your dog and he becomes anxious and upset.

An example of this would be bringing your dog to the vet. Most dogs are very nervous in this situation. The vet’s office smells strange, has lots of strange noises and has people who are dressed differently than anyone else they’ve seen. Plus every time Fido goes to this awful place, he has something unpleasant happen to him! Most people don’t like going to the vet’s as well; needles make us nervous!

So here is Fido, shaking and hiding under your chair. You reach under to pet Fido and say “IT’S OK” in a soothing tone of voice. What has just happened is that you have reinforced fearful behavior in your dog by giving him attention (petting) and talking in a soothing tone of voice to him. What your dog has learned to do is to act nervous, shake and hide, because then Mum pets me. Your dog actually thinks he is doing the right thing by acting scared, because your reaction to him told him so! Your dog then starts to act even more nervous each time you go to the vet’s.

Instead, you should act happy and confident to help Fido overcome his fears. Follow the guidelines below to help you learn the Jolly Routine.

BASIC GUIDELINES FOR SOCIALIZING YOUR DOG

DO NOT DRAG YOUR DOG TOWARD THE OBJECT OR PERSON THEY ARE AFRAID OF.

Letting your dog approach upon his own willpower along some of his most favorite treats will help your pet to overcome the fear! (See the section on easing the fearful dog's fright for detailed instructions on how to use treats and toys to help him overcome his fear).

DO NOT TOUCH OR TALK SOOTHINGLY TO A FRIGHTENED DOG.

You only make them worse. A better way to deal with that situation is to ignore your dog if he is hiding, and only speak happily and touch Fido when he comes out from under your chair or actually starts to investigate. Help Fido learn that being confident and bold is what you really want him to be. You are JOLLY to help your dog overcome his fear.

DO NOT PICK UP YOUR SMALL PUPPY OR DOG IF HE IS AFRAID.

You would be rewarding him for acting shy by coddling him. Remember, a small breed of dog is going to be little the rest of his life, so you need to help him learn how to deal with the world at his own height level *by leaving him on the floor.*

ACT AND TALK HAPPY.

Act like the situation is no big deal. Talk to your dog like you do when you play together. So instead of your dog remaining in a fearful mode, you switch him over to a play mode. Bringing your dog's favorite toy or treat with you can help him overcome his fears as well.

TAKE YOUR DOG TO AS MANY PLACES AS POSSIBLE, TO MEET AS MANY DIFFERENT PEOPLE AS POSSIBLE.

Your dog needs to have as many positive experiences as you can possibly provide, so that when one bad experience happens, like getting a shot at the vet's, it is not so traumatic. Take your dog into your vet's just for a cookie from everyone there, and a hop on the weight scale. Then go home. Repeat several times a month, if possible, and guess what your dog learns? Fido thinks "Hey, this is not such a bad place...in fact it is quite fun...I get lots of cookies and nothing bad happens, but once in a great while! I think I really like this place!"

HESITATION IS NORMAL IN SOCIALIZING YOUR DOG, BUT PANIC IS NOT!

If your dog panics, you need to actively work on socializing your dog to that situation, person or object. Do not think that ignoring it will help. Dogs do not grow out of fears, they only become worse unless you work directly on the problem. Please use the techniques described below to help your dog overcome his fears.

EASING THE FEARFUL DOG'S FRIGHT AND DEALING WITH DIFFERENT KINDS OF FEAR

"I THOUGHT I SAW A GHOST" OR OBJECT FEAR.

If your dog is afraid of certain objects (like a beach ball), you would need to use the Jolly Routine around the ball. At first, do not even move or roll the ball but let your dog approach it on his own. The dog approaching first gives him an element of control that will help him with confidence.

If he is very leery put a special treat near the ball and let him eat it. When he is calmly eating a treat at one distance from the ball, then put the treat a step closer and repeat the process. Keep repeating until your dog will eat a cookie right off the top of it or right next to it.

For some dogs, the above process may take only ten minutes. For others it may be a couple of days. The main thing is to let the dog tell you when he's ready to move closer to the ball and that will be when he is calmly eating a treat at a certain distance from the ball. Once your dog is calmly approaching the ball, then you can add movement while you do the Jolly Routine. Use this approach on all foreign objects that your dog seems fearful of.

"I THOUGHT I HEARD A GHOST" OR NOISE FEAR.

Common noise fears are fireworks, fire engines, gunshots, jackhammers, thunderstorms, screaming or crowd noises, loud music, and vacuums or lawnmowers. For dealing with this fear of noises, you have several options. Either acquire a tape of the noise your dog is afraid of, or create the noise yourself.

If you acquire a tape of the noise your dog is afraid of, first play it at a volume level that you would play as if you had a baby sleeping in the next room. Make sure you are with your dog during the first stages of socializing him to this scary sound. When your dog appears relaxed at this level, up the volume by one-half a level. So if you started on level 2 then go to 2 1/2. Your dog will tell you when he is ready to go to the next volume level by again, acting relaxed. If at any time he becomes frightened, remember to do the Jolly Routine, and lower the volume back down to the previous level where he was relaxed. Frequent playing with your dog during the scary noise will lessen its impact upon him and in fact, get him to associate something good with that awful noise!

If you are recreating the noise yourself, first make sure your dog is not afraid of the object itself, like the vacuum. Use the Jolly Routine and use food described above to acquaint him with the object in a far room, so the noise is very distant and then play ball or practice some obedience work with your dog in the opposite room. Once he is relaxed, put the vacuum in a closer room. At this point you are not moving the object. Work in a step-like-manner until your dog can be in the same room as the object, (in this case the vacuum), with it turned on and him playing around it or going to get a treat placed on or near it.

Next, you may actually start to vacuum slowly, again remembering to use the Jolly Routine if he appears to be afraid.

"MY GOSH, THAT IS A GHOST!" OR "PEOPLE FEAR."

Dogs can also develop fears of different people if not socialized properly. Dogs are not prejudice like humans, but simply fear what they have not been exposed to before. Try to expose your dog to people who vary in age, weight, height, and nationality. Expose your dog to people wearing different clothing such as hats and glasses, even scuba gear! Expose your dog to people who have beards, people who use wheelchairs, and people who are carrying objects such as grocery bags, canes, tennis rackets, suitcases, and tools.

Any combination of people you can possibly imagine, you want to expose your dog to using the Jolly Routine. Simply have the person you are introducing your dog to feed your dog a cookie! What a wonderful way for Fido to learn that people are not scary and they carry cookies too! Please make sure that if your dog is excited about meeting someone new, have Fido sit before he is fed. That way, he is learning good habits, (like sitting before getting a treat), as well as being socialized.

If your dog is very fearful of someone, do not drag him toward the "three headed dragon." You will only make your dog's fear worse. Just have that "dragon" stand still and be quiet while you leave a trail of cookies toward them.

When your dog is comfortable going up to the person, have the “dragon” feed him a cookie. If your dog will not approach their hand, have your “dragon” drop the cookie at their feet for your dog to eat. All the while you are acting JOLLY to assist your dog in gaining confidence. Once your dog easily takes a cookie dropped at the “dragon’s” feet, then have the person crouch down. Let your dog approach, and eventually have your dog take a cookie from their hand.

NEVER AT ANY TIME SHOULD YOU PUSH OR PULL YOUR DOG TOWARD A PERSON THEY ARE AFRAID OF. Your dog may be so fearful he may feel that he has no choice but to bite them to keep them away from him.

RECOMMENDED READING:

- **The Cautious Canine: How to Help Dogs Conquer Their Fears** – Patricia McConnell
- **Help for your Shy Dog** – Deborah Wood
- **Help for your Fearful Dog** – Nicole Wilde