

Socializing Your New Puppy:



WHAT IS SOCIALIZATION?

THE MOST IMPORTANT THING YOUR PUPPY NEEDS BESIDES FOOD! Socialization is the process during which the puppy develops relationships with other living beings in its environment. It is literally introducing your puppy to as many different environments and situations as possible. Socialization is one of the most important things that you can do for your new puppy besides feeding him!

Dogs that are well socialized are happy, secure, confident pets who will readily interact with all types of people. A socialized puppy will easily play with a wide variety of dogs. He is not afraid of most objects and may be cautious about certain things, but he does not panic and recovers quickly if startled.

WHY IS SOCIALIZATION SO IMPORTANT?

To reduce the possibility of fearful responses as a puppy grows and matures, it is essential to expose young puppies to many stimuli (people, places and things, sounds, smells, events). Early handling and events that occur during the first 2 to 4 months of life, are critical factors in the social development of the dog. Dogs that receive insufficient exposure to people, other animals, sounds, and new environments during this time may develop irreversible fears, leading to timidity or aggression. The number one cause of death among dogs is behavior problems stemming from a lack of socialization!

WHAT CAN I DO TO IMPROVE MY CHANCES OF HAVING A SOCIAL, NON-FEARFUL DOG?

PEDIGREE - The genetics of the breed and of the parents in particular play an important role in how sociable, playful, fearful, excitable, or domineering a puppy becomes. Choose a breed and parents (both male and female) that have the type of behavior that you would like the puppy to have. Of course, there is a great deal of variability from individual to individual, so that breed and parental behavior will not always be indicative of what the puppy will be like. At the shelter, many of our puppies come to us as strays or were surrendered by their owners. We have little or no knowledge about the puppy's parents. We do, however, temperament test each puppy, and his individual traits are documented, so we can place him in the right home.

PUPPY ASSESSMENT - Even the most social and playful of puppies may become fearful and aggressive as they develop out of puppyhood. Avoid selecting puppies that are shy, withdrawn or fearful. But selecting a friendly and unfearful puppy does not ensure that this behavior will persist into adulthood. Only plenty of proper ongoing socialization can ensure that the puppy grows up to be confident and relaxed in a wide variety of circumstances.

EARLY HANDLING - Puppies that are stimulated and handled from birth to five weeks of age are more confident, social, exploratory, faster maturing and better able to handle stress as they develop. Puppies obtained from a breeder or home where they have had frequent contact and interaction with people are likely to be more social and less fearful as they develop. Continued handling is needed to assure that the puppy accepts touch for grooming, medical care and affection.

PRIMARY SOCIALIZATION - There is a sensitive period in the development of most species when they develop social attachments with their own kind and other species. The events that occur during this socialization period determine the puppy's future social partners, as well as to what species it feels it belongs. By recognizing the critical time frame in which canine socialization develops, you can help to ensure a healthy social attachment to people and other animals, including other dogs.

The primary socialization period for dogs begins at 3 weeks of age and is diminishing by 12 weeks. Peak sensitivity is at 6 to 8 weeks. Beyond 12 weeks there is a tendency to act fearfully towards new people, animals and situations. Many young dogs will regress or become fearful again if they do not receive continued social interaction as they grow and develop. The 6-8 month period is another important time

ForTo develop a healthy social relationship with other dogs throughout life, dogs should maintain their social contacts with their mother and littermates until 6 to 8 weeks of age. They should continue to have regular social interaction and play sessions with other friendly dogs after they are taken into new homes. The puppy would do best if there were regular, sociable playmates in the neighborhood that it could interact with on a daily basis.

WHAT IS THE BEST AGE TO OBTAIN MY NEW PUPPY? Since it is so important for the puppy to develop and maintain social attachments to their own kind, puppies ideally should remain with their mother and littermates until about seven to eight weeks of age. Obtaining a puppy earlier than 7 weeks of age is detrimental to his social development with his own kind and can result in early aggression problems towards humans as well. When placed in a new home at seven to eight weeks of age, puppies can more easily expand their social contacts to new people and species while still in their primary socialization period. By this time also puppies will begin to develop preferences for elimination sites, which can also be very helpful for housetraining purposes.

WHAT CAN I DO TO ASSIST MY PUPPY IN ITS SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT?

Your puppy is most likely to become fearful of things or people that are not found in its day-to-day routine. Make a conscious effort to identify those people and situations that the puppy is not regularly exposed to. For example, if there are no children in the home, you might arrange regular play sessions with children. If you live in the country, make a few trips into the city so that the puppy can be taken for walks on city streets or through neighborhood plazas. Conversely, a puppy that grows up in the city might become fearful or aggressive toward farm animals that it was not exposed to during its early development.

Introduce your puppy to as many new people and situations as possible, beginning in its first three months of development. People in uniforms, babies, toddlers, the elderly, and the physically challenged are just a few examples that might create fear and anxiety in the puppy unless there is sufficient early exposure. Similarly, car rides, elevators, stairs, and noises of cars, trains, airplanes, and hot air balloons are examples of events and experiences to which the puppy might be usefully exposed.

One way to facilitate the introduction of the puppy to new situations and people is to provide a reward such as a favorite toy or tasty treat each time it is exposed to a new stimulus. Having a stranger offer a bit of hot dog to the puppy will teach it to look forward to meeting people. This will also discourage hand-shyness since the puppy will learn to associate new friends and an outstretched hand with something positive. Once the puppy has learned to sit on command, have each new friend ask it to sit before giving the treat. This teaches a proper greeting and will make the puppy less likely to jump up on people.

Be certain that the puppy has the opportunity to meet and receive treats from a wide variety of people of all ages, races, appearance and both genders during the formative months. There will of course, be times when your puppy is in a new situation and you do not have treats. Be sure then to use a happy tone of voice to encourage your puppy to explore and greet the new situation with confidence.

If your puppy seems to panic, back off a little and try again later, rather than dragging him forward to meet someone. Never reassure (pet or praise) the fearful dog as this might serve to reward the fearful behavior.

IS IT HEALTHY TO TAKE MY PUPPY OUT IN PUBLIC AT SUCH A YOUNG AGE?

There is always a concern about the risks of taking the puppy out of its home before it is fully vaccinated because it may be exposed to infection before the vaccines have had time to become protective. However, benefits gained from these new and early public appearances can be enormous and without them the risk of the puppy developing permanent fears or anxiety is a serious concern. More dogs die of behavior problems due to lack of socialization than they do from disease.

One solution is to have people and healthy, vaccinated, friendly animals visit the puppy in its own home until it is sufficiently vaccinated to be taken out. A compromise is to take the puppy out to meet people and other pets in low-risk environments. Go to a friend's house that has no dogs or has nice, friendly, vaccinated dogs. As long as vaccines are up-to-date, taking the puppy for walks along the sidewalk and avoiding neighborhood parks where stools and urine might accumulate is generally safe and effective.

One of the most important things you can do to aid your puppy in socialization is to enroll your new pet in puppy training and socialization classes as soon as he turns 10-12 weeks old. These classes provide a wonderful variety and plentiful exposure to people and other dogs, in a very low risk environment. Pick a class that is held indoors in a room that can be cleaned and disinfected. All puppies should be screened for vaccinations and health (including internal parasites) prior to each course. The class should recommend the use of food and toys to train the puppy. Avoid a class that requires you to put the puppy on a choke or pinch collar or forbids the use of food in training.

IS THERE SUCH A THING AS OVERSOCIALIZING A PUPPY?

There is simply no way you can over socialize your new puppy. **The most common error is to not do enough.** Make it a point to spend a lot of time with your new puppy, doing different things, going different places and meeting all kinds of different people on a regular basis. Take your puppy to the veterinarian's office several times a month for a hop on the weight scale and a cookie from everyone, and then go home.

Make it a goal, especially in the first six months of your dog's life, to take him someplace new at least once a week or, better yet, twice a week. Stand in front of the grocery or video store and have people feed your dog a bit of hot dog. Take your dog to a different park every week. Take your dog camping with you or on a field trip to a farm. This is a time in your dog's life that you cannot go back and try to "fix it" later. It only comes once and you want to make the most of this critical period. Love your new puppy by taking the time to socialize him thoroughly! Continue socializing your dog through his first year of life to assure you will have a happy, confident companion.

MY PUPPY SEEMS AFRAID IN SOME SITUATIONS; WHAT SHOULD I DO?

If your puppy is afraid (hiding behind you, body and tail lowered, running away, barking or growling) of something or someone, don't force your dog to approach them. Let your puppy approach on his own time. You can speed the process by leading a trail of tasty treats right up to the scary thing. Act normal or ignore your puppy when he is frightened, but do not pet or praise him as this may reward his fearful behavior. Make it a point to work on socializing your puppy to that particular situation so that he becomes more confident. Ignoring fearful behavior in your puppy will not help. Dogs do not grow out of fears; they only become worse unless you work directly on the problem.

RECOMMENDED READING

- **Before and After You Get Your Puppy** – Ian Dunbar
- **Your Outta Control Puppy: How to Turn Your Precocious Pup Into a Perfect Pet** – Teoti Anderson
- **Puppy Primer** – Patricia McConnell & Brenda Scidmore