

Socializing Your Puppy

How to create a well adjusted, happy companion

What Is Socialization?

Socialization means to let puppies meet, greet and enjoy a variety of people, animals, places and things. Our job is to expose them at a young, impressionable age to all sorts of experiences in an enjoyable way, without overwhelming them. This helps ensure that they'll feel comfortable and friendly — rather than stressed, fearful or aggressive — in many situations, around all kinds of people and animals, for the rest of their lives.

Socialization is the opposite of isolation

- Exposure to new things + praise, treats or play = **socialization** (pleasant experience)
- Lack of exposure = **isolation** (leading to lifelong behavior problems)

A puppy's first few months are the most critical learning stage in his life. And they're your best chance to positively shape his temperament for the rest of his life.

Why Is It So Important?

Like children, puppies go through a series of developmental stages. **The period from 3 to 14 weeks is the "critical socialization period,"** the time when puppies easily form social attachments and learn what's normal and safe in their world. The earlier in life your puppy experiences things, the more normal they seem to him. Puppies are learning sponges, and their natural curiosity and friendliness outweigh caution or fear. While puppies will still approach most people, locations and objects without fear, we must provide abundant opportunities for them to do so. This helps them readily adapt to the unfamiliar, now and later in adulthood.

Research shows that the socialization "window" starts to close at 12 to 14 weeks of age. After that, puppies become more wary of new things, a phenomenon all animals experience called neophobia. If they haven't had plenty of pleasant experiences with new people, places and other animals before that age, they can develop fears, as well as attachment disorders and aggression problems. Under socialized dogs are a risk to their owners and others because they often become frightened by everyday things, and fearful dogs are more likely to aggress or bite. They tend to fight with other dogs, they don't adapt to new situations, and routine outings (like to the vet's office or a car trip somewhere new) become stressful for them and everyone involved.

How Do I Socialize My Puppy?

Go Places

- Take your puppy somewhere new every day. If you live in the country, take her into town. If you live in town, take her to the country.
- Take her to friends' homes and wherever dogs are allowed — the vet's office, pet store, park, river or beach, train station, schoolyard, groomer's & dog training school.
- Take daily walks with your puppy, using as many different routes as possible.

Meet people & animals

- Enroll in a puppy class. She'll learn good skills, meet new people, and through puppy play, learn how to play well and get along with a variety of dogs.
- Let her meet babies, kids, elderly, men and women in uniforms, wearing hats or glasses, using canes or wheelchairs, or carrying objects (like umbrellas or boxes). By interacting with strangers, puppies learn to feel comfortable around people they don't know.
- Let her meet at least a couple of new people every day, especially children & men. Family, friends, strangers, visitors — at your house, in the street and in the park.
- Throw parties or go to crowded public events so she meets a lot of people at once.
- Get your puppy comfortable with being handled all over — her paws, ears, mouth & tail.
- Introduce her to farm animals, horses, ducks in the park, other dogs, cats, and small pets like guinea pigs, hamsters & birds. Let her play with friendly dogs as often as possible.

Hear sounds, and investigate machines and other objects

- TV, radio, vacuum cleaner, hair dryer.
- Ringing doorbells or knocking.
- Children playing and screaming.
- Cars, buses, trains, stairways, elevators, construction sites, playgrounds.
- Different surfaces like linoleum, carpet, concrete & grass.

Socialization Do's

- Let your puppy take things at his own pace. Let him back away from something if he wants to. Your job is to provide the opportunity, not force anything.
- Use treats to socialize. Carry them with you, and give a tidbit to everyone you meet. Ask them to give your puppy a tidbit for a sit.
- Praise & treat your puppy for friendly behavior. If he reacts fearfully or overreacts, back away from the person or object until he's calm, then treat him at that distance.
- *Always* supervise dogs and children. Make sure your puppy doesn't get overwhelmed.

Socialization Don'ts

Don't force or rush your puppy. Don't let the experience be unpleasant or scary. Bad experiences at a young age can create lifetime fear. Socialize gradually, in baby steps.