



Socializing Your New Puppy

Courtesy of the ASPCA

When we talk about socializing puppies, it means helping them learn to be comfortable as a pet within human society—a society that includes many different types of people, environments, buildings, sights, noises, smells, animals and other dogs. Most young animals, including dogs, are naturally made to be able to get used to the everyday things they encounter in their environment—until they reach a certain age. When they reach that age, they are naturally made to become much more suspicious of things they haven't yet experienced.

What Age Is Best for Puppy Socialization?

Puppies are most accepting of new experiences between 3 and 12 weeks old. After that age, they become much more cautious of anything they haven't yet encountered. From about 12 to 18 weeks old the opportunity to easily socialize the puppy ends—and with each passing week it becomes harder to get the pup to accept and enjoy something that he's initially wary of. After 18 weeks old, it's extremely difficult, and sometimes impossible, to teach a dog to like something new, or help him become comfortable with something he finds frightening.

Vaccinations and Disease Risk During Early Socialization

Most young puppies aren't fully protected against the diseases we vaccinated them for until they've had all of their puppy shots. The good news is that if you take some commonsense precautions while socializing your puppy, the risk of infection is quite small compared to the much larger risk of your puppy developing serious behavior problems with fear and aggression later in life.

- Keep your puppy in places where there is low risk of infection. Locations indoors, yards that are protected from at risk dogs, and car rides are great places to work on socializing your puppy.
- Bring your puppy to indoor meetings or get-togethers. Supervise any children interacting with your puppy to make sure he isn't frightened and they are being gentle.
- Take your pup on car rides through different neighborhoods, drive-thru's, car washes, and out in the country so he can see and smell lots of different animals and sights.
- Arrange play sessions with other puppies and adult dogs who you know are healthy and fully vaccinated.

Why Is Puppy Socialization Important?

Well-socialized puppies usually develop into safer, more relaxed and enjoyable pet dogs. This is because they're more comfortable in a wider variety of situations than poorly socialized dogs, so they're less likely to behave fearfully or aggressively when faced with something new. Poorly socialized dogs are much more likely to react with fear or aggression to unfamiliar people, dogs and experiences. Well-socialized dogs also live much more relaxed, peaceful and happy lives than dogs who are constantly stressed out by their environment. The wider the range of experiences you expose him to, the better his chances are of being comfortable in a wide variety of situations as an adult.

Socialization is a big project. It requires exposure to the types of people, animals, places, sounds and experiences that you expect your dog to be comfortable in later in life. Depending on the lifestyle you have planned for your dog, this might include the sight and sound of trains, garbage trucks, schoolyards of screaming children, crowds, cats, livestock or crying infants. For any pet dog, it's essential to get him used to the common types of people, dogs, sights, sounds and physical handling and grooming that will be a sure part of his daily life.

Don't Go Too Fast!

You need to make sure that the situation is not overwhelming for him, and that he becomes more comfortable—not more worried—each time you expose him to something. Even though your intentions are good, if your puppy is cowering in the corner, then he's not learning anything good! The rule of thumb with puppy socialization is to keep a close eye on your puppy's reaction to whatever you expose him to so that you can tone things down if your pup seems at all frightened. Always follow up a socialization experience with praise, petting, a fun game or a special treat.

It's important to introduce your puppy to scary situations gradually, and to make a big effort to do something your puppy loves during the situation or right afterwards. For example, if your puppy seems to be frightened while sitting on your lap in a schoolyard full of children, then sit further away from the action and offer your pup a delicious treat each time a scary noise or movement happens. Another solution is to go to a much quieter park where only a few children are playing, use praise and treats to help convince him it's a great place to be, and then over days or even weeks of your socialization sessions, gradually approach a schoolyard again once he's started to like the sights and sounds of active children.

Puppy Classes

One great way to help socialize a puppy is to attend puppy kindergarten classes. These are classes designed especially for puppy training and early socialization. In a typical puppy class, off-leash play and play-fighting helps socialize puppies with each other, teaches them to be gentle with their mouthing and biting, and gets them used to being handled by a variety of people. Some classes even include exposure to odd sights and sounds using props, CDs of sounds, and theatrics with costumes to accustom the puppies to a wide range of life experiences. Puppy classes also teach some basic obedience skills, so on top of the socialization component, you'll learn how to ask your pup to comply with your requests and behave according to your expectations.

