

SOCIALIZING YOUR DOG

The word “socialization” has several meanings. When we talk about a “well socialized dog” we mean a dog that isn’t afraid of everyday events, can be friendly toward unfamiliar individuals, is easy to handle, gets along well with other dogs, people, even cats and other species, and can adjust relatively easily to change in a confident way without becoming fearful or threatening.

When we talk about “socializing a dog,” we mean, starting in puppyhood, giving the dog pleasant experiences with events, objects, and individuals he is likely to encounter throughout life. These experiences help the dog meet the above description of being well socialized.

In the scientific literature, “socialization” in its most basic sense means the formation of attachments between individuals.

A Sensitive Period for Socialization

During a period of time when puppies are very young, they are very open to new experiences. They aren’t afraid of the unfamiliar and will usually rapidly approach new objects, animals and people with friendliness and curiosity. This window of time is called the sensitive period for socialization and in puppies occurs between four and twelve weeks of age. Socialization occurs quite readily because of the puppy’s general lack of fear.

As puppies mature, it’s normal for them to become increasingly cautious about anything unfamiliar. This increased reluctance to approach what they don’t know is what limits the sensitive period for socialization.

The capability for socialization doesn’t end with the end of this sensitive period, but the older a dog is when first exposed to new things, the harder it is for him to adjust. Dogs that have only limited experience with the world in general during puppyhood and the sensitive period for socialization may always have difficulty accepting changes and anything different.

How To Socialize Your Dog

Remember that the process of socialization means giving your dog pleasant experiences with a wide variety of objects, events, people, and other animals he is likely to encounter as an adult. Typical socialization experiences could include a car ride, an introduction to a crate, a puppy class, being brushed or taken to the grooming salon, playing gently with children, taken next door to the neighbor’s for a visit, a trip to the veterinary clinic, meeting other puppies, playing with dog-friendly cats, watching the vacuum cleaner and meeting dog-tolerant cats.

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The key is that these experiences must be enjoyable rather than fear producing. So socialization trips to the grooming salon or veterinarian won't include a bath or vaccinations, but just exposure to the facility and staff.

Socialization experiences can be made enjoyable through the use of tasty treats, exciting toys, and gentle petting and massage. The greater the number of positive experiences your puppy has, the less likely a negative experience will have an adverse impact on him.

Allow your puppy to experience things at his own pace. Avoid forcing him to approach or deal with something that frightens him. Instead, find a way to make things easier or less intense for him. For very intense situations or experiences, start with less intense ones and gradually increase them. For example, to expose your dog to a vacuum cleaner, start with the vacuum sitting turned off. Let him explore the vacuum while you give him treats, pets or play with him. Move him some distance away and turn the vacuum on. Let your dog approach the vacuum if he wants to. If he is frightened, turn the vacuum off, but move it around slowly and see if he'll approach it. If he doesn't go back to having him just be around the stationary vacuum.

Make a list of things that you expect your dog will encounter throughout his lifetime. This list might include various household noises, different surfaces, stairs, mobility aids such as wheelchairs, canes or walkers, people with various facial features such as beards or long hair, other species of animals such as birds and horses, and various events such as soccer games, children's birthday parties or loud television programs. Introduce your puppy to these things as you can.

It is extremely important for puppies to have many opportunities to play with and interact with other puppies so they can learn the rules and develop their social skills. That's one reason why puppy classes are so important. Those offered at veterinary practices ensure that all dogs are vaccinated.

Socialization should also include giving your puppy experiences with mild restraint and handling that will be necessary throughout his lifetime in order to monitor his health and hygiene. To learn more read the Pamphlets for Pet Parents about teaching your dog to accept these procedures.

How To Resolve Problems Due to Poor Socialization

Older dogs can still be socialized. But because that window for easy socialization has closed, there may be limits to how socialization later in life can compensate for what didn't happen during puppyhood.

Socialization experiences with dogs that are already fearful must be much more gradual. "Remedial socialization" actually makes use of behavior modification techniques known as desensitization and counter conditioning techniques. These procedures change your dog's emotional state, and the significance of the situational triggers that may cause fear or threatening behavior. Read the Pamphlet for Pet Parents about these techniques to learn more.

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What Not To Do

Do not force your dog to experience things that make him fearful or aggressive. Let him proceed at his own pace. Forcing will only make the experience unpleasant and could result in fearful or threatening behaviors in the future. Do not punish your dog for fearful or threatening behaviors or for trying to avoid situations he doesn't want to be in. This could be dangerous to you or to others.

Written by Drs. Suzanne Hetts and Daniel Q. Estep, Animal Behavior Associates, Inc. and Ms. Lori Holmberg, M.A. Drs. Hetts and Estep are Certified Applied Animal Behaviorists and international award-winning speakers and authors living in Denver, Colorado. For over 25 years they have been helping pet parents understand their pet's behavior and solve behavior problems.

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