



Canine Development

Puppy Socialization

Socialization—the process by which all puppies learn how to interact with people, other dogs and the world around them.

Common Misconceptions Regarding Puppy Socialization

Myth: Some puppies simply cannot be socialized.

Fact: All puppies are socialized as they learn how to perceive the world around them. The difference is whether the puppy is '*socialized well*' or '*socialized poorly*'.

Myth: Socializing a puppy means simply exposing him/her to many different things.

Fact: Exposure to a variety of experiences is important, but simply giving the puppy random and/or uncontrolled experiences may not teach the puppy what you want him to learn.

Myth: I should start socializing my puppy after he reaches 3-4 months old.

Fact: Puppies go through their critical socialization period between the ages of 5 and 12 weeks. At about 12 weeks of age, a window closes in the puppy's brain and many of his ideas about the world are set for life.

Myth: I can stop socializing my puppy after 12 weeks of age since the critical socialization period has ended.

Fact: Although the critical window has closed, puppies will continue to solidify their impressions at least until they are adults (at about 2 years of age) and – to a certain extent – throughout their lives.

Tips for Properly Socializing your Puppy

1) Introduce your puppy to as many people as possible, as long as those people are *good influences* and/or as long as *you have influence over your puppy's experience*. For example, you do not want your puppy to learn to chase and nip at children (or become afraid of them), so do not leave him alone with children that will allow or encourage him to practice that behavior.

2) Introduce your puppy to other dogs that are *good role models*, and *monitor your puppy's interaction with other dogs*. Puppies are highly impressionable, and they are very likely to imitate the behavior of the other dogs they meet. Always consider prospective play-mates and ask yourself if you want your puppy to end up behaving like that dog.



3) Introduce your puppy mostly to *adult dogs*. Leaving two puppies to play with one another and calling it good socialization is like leaving two 3 year olds together and calling it school. Puppies teach each other very little, except for how to behave in a wild and un-controlled manner and how to bully one another. Adults are the role models you want, *if they are good dogs* and you wish for your dog to pick up their behaviors.

4) Spend more time with your puppy than your puppy spends with other dogs. It's very easy for puppies to relate to other dogs, of course, since they speak the same 'language'. Human beings are the foreigners in a puppy's life. If you want your puppy to develop a strong bond with you (and have training become much easier), you will have to make it clear that you are the friend, playmate, and source of resources, and those other dogs are just occasional visitors in his life.

5) Expose your puppy to a variety of noises, places, and experiences. *If your puppy becomes frightened, do not console him!* If your puppy is behaving in a frightened manner and you are talking to him, holding him, petting him, etc., he will perceive this as an affirmation that he is supposed to be scared and that he is behaving appropriately. This is how well-intentioned people create neurotic dogs.

6) Do not force your puppy to do something that is scaring him. Simply expose him to the situation, and do not make a big deal out of it. Examples: If your puppy is scared of having his nails trimmed, do not trim his nails for awhile. Instead, put match sticks beneath his feet and trim those instead. Give him a treat each time a match stick is trimmed. If your puppy is scared to swim, do not force him... simply go swimming yourself, or let him watch other dogs swimming. He is very likely to follow.

7) Try to expose your puppy to positive things, however, puppies will possibly act afraid of unknown, new things. Just allow the puppy to explore as long as it is safe without talking to the puppy or telling him it's 'okay'. If your puppy is frightened of something that is not harmful to him, expose him to that thing multiple times, until he is no longer frightened. Try to make each exposure as pleasant or as uneventful as possible. (Example: If your puppy is scared of a loud noise, expose him to that noise multiple times. Do not respond when he reacts; just go on as if nothing had happened. Remember, for dogs *your* reaction is often reinforcement.)



8) Take it slow. Don't wait until your puppy is 5 months old but don't dunk your puppy in things too much in the beginning. It is safe to take your puppy to as many places as possible for no more than 20-30 minutes at a time. Anything longer for a puppy under 4 months of age is very exhausting and could cause the puppy stress and then the whole situation will backfire. We usually recommend 3-4 times a week at 20 minutes each outing until the puppy is around 5 months and then you can increase it to 5 times a week for 30-45 minutes. After 6-7 months of age you can be the judge of your dog's exposure, still maintaining that the experiences are positive and not over-exhausting. (Example: A 2-hour soccer game may be a great place to expose your puppy to kids but it can be overwhelming, work up to the soccer game!)