



Peninsula Humane Society & SPCA

Why Socialize? The Most Important Thing You Can Do for Your Puppy

Have you encountered dogs who bark at strangers, shy away from children, snap at other dogs, or jump at loud noises? These are likely dogs who were not **socialized** as puppies. **Socializing** a puppy means teaching her how to be comfortable around many different people, places, and other animals.

Thousands of years of domestication and breeding have created the dogs that share our lives. However, we are still responsible for helping puppies become well-adjusted, and this momentous step must occur between the ages of 3-12 weeks, when a puppy is most open to new experiences. Anything a puppy has not encountered and welcomed by the age of 3 months can trigger a fear response that will cause stress and may be difficult to overcome.

If you are acquiring your puppy from a breeder, insist on visiting the facility and meeting the parents. You want to ensure that your puppy is raised by her mother and receives loving and careful human handling.

Once your puppy is home, socialization is a big job - you'll need to have a plan and time to follow through. (See EXPOSURE CHECKLIST on back.) But, important task should be lots of fun.

AT YOUR HOUSE

Fill up your puppy's social calendar! This is the time to invite your family, friends, and neighbors over for "puppy parties." Give guests a bag of puppy kibble (not extra food but part of her dinner), and instruct them to lure the pup over for cuddling and a bit of basic training (come, sit, lie down). Ask each person to pick up the puppy, give her a treat, and feel her all over, including her mouth, paws, and tail. You're training your puppy to love people and to accept handling that will make future visits to the veterinarian and groomer much easier. Recruit as many men and children as possible, as these are categories of people that worry some dogs the most.

A NOTE ABOUT TIMING AND HYGIENE

Socialization is so important that it just can't wait until your puppy is fully vaccinated (so says the most recent accepted veterinary opinion). Because a puppy cannot

be fully vaccinated until after the socialization period, she must be protected against illnesses and parasites. Have your guests remove their shoes and wash their hands before handling your puppy. And conduct these introductions inside, on clean surfaces, not in areas where unknown dogs have been.

THE SHYER PUPPY

Keeping your goal in mind, watch how your puppy responds and ease up if she seems frightened. You can ask people to approach more slowly or give your puppy a reassuring caress and treat on your own lap before going on with the exercise. If she looks overwhelmed by the sounds and sights, move away to a quieter area, praise and pet her, and then move a little closer to the action again. If your puppy continues to be fearful, start working with a professional trainer immediately so this behavior doesn't worsen.

PUPPY CLASSES AND BEYOND

Enroll your puppy in a class as soon as she is 2 months old to continue the work you've begun at home, and expose your puppy to different real-life situations. Supervised playtime helps puppies learn to play well with others. They'll also meet lots of new humans, and so will you! The Peninsula Humane Society & SPCA offers a full range of puppy classes, as well as training for adult dogs.

Other venues are fun for field trips too. Shopping centers and pet-friendly businesses, where there is little traffic from unknown dogs, bring a flow of people right to you. Don't forget treats! Arrange to bring your puppy to a Boy or Girl Scout meeting or afterschool club where she can meet many children in a controlled and positive setting.

Walk (or carry) your puppy out in the world to build her confidence. Bring your puppy's dinner and a toy with you so that you can reward calm, friendly behavior and bring extra special treats for such challenging encounters as men wearing hats or skateboards. Allow interested passersby to ask your puppy to sit for a treat. **NOTE: Remember to carry your puppy on these excursions until she has all her shots.**



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Play dates with other dogs you know to be healthy and well behaved can give your young dog the practice she needs with her peers.

EXPOSURE CHECKLIST

(before your puppy reaches 3 months, expose her to):

- people of many sizes, ages, and ethnicities
- wheelchairs/crutches, bicycles, skateboards, roller skates, strollers
- people in uniform, delivery and repair people
- people wearing hats, helmets, carrying luggage, and umbrellas
- people dancing, running, skipping, singing, yelling, cheering, clapping
- animals, including other dogs, cats and other species
- traffic of all kinds, including cars, trucks, motorcycles, and bicycles
- surfaces of all kinds, including shiny floors, tiles, stairs, gravel, cement
- elevators, automatic doors, escalators, balconies
- drive-through windows, car washes, tunnels
- noises at home, such as hair dryers, vacuums, and dishwashers
- noises outside such as leaf blowers, construction, fireworks, crowds
- weather of all kinds, including walks after dark in wet or cold weather
- the veterinarian's office

Add to this list other experiences you know your dog will encounter in her life. Repeat exposure to experiences that seem challenging to your puppy or that you know she'll encounter often.

CONCLUSION

A dog may be man's and woman's best friend, but we shape our friend by the choices we make early in her life. Your reward for dedicating yourself to the task of socialization during the early weeks of your puppy's development will be the joy of sharing your life with a calmer, more confident dog who knows how to behave in our human world.

For more info, call our free Behavior Helpline (650/340-7022 x783 or, for Spanish, x786) or consider a low-cost consultation. To make a consultation appointment, call 650/340-7022 x667. The PHS/SPCA Behavior Department, like many shelter programs, is funded by donations.