

Socializing Your Puppy

What Is Socialization?

Socialization means learning to be part of society. When we talk about socializing puppies, it means we're 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 designed to absorb and grow accustomed to the everyday things they encounter in their environment—until they reach a certain age. When they reach that age, they are naturally designed to become much more suspicious of things they haven't yet experienced. Mother Nature is smart! This age-specific natural development lets a young puppy get comfortable with the everyday sights, sounds, people, and animals that will be a part of his life. It ensures that he doesn't spend his life jumping in fright at every blowing leaf or bird song. The suspicion they develop in later puppyhood also ensures that he does react with a healthy dose of caution to new things that could truly be dangerous.

What Age Is Best for Puppy Socialization?

On average, 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.

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. Dogs who are relaxed about honking horns, cats, cyclists, vet examinations, crowds, and long stairwells are easier and safer to live with than dogs who find these situations threatening. Well-socialized dogs also live much more relaxed, peaceful, and happy lives than dogs who are constantly stressed out by their environment.

Socialization isn't an "all or nothing" project. You can socialize a puppy a bit, a lot, or a whole lot. The wider the range of experiences you positively expose him to, the better his chances are of being comfortable in a wide variety of situations as an adult.

How Does a Puppy Need to Be Socialized?

Socialization is a big project. It requires exposure to the types of people, animals, places, sounds, and experiences that you expect him to be comfortable with later in life. Depending on the lifestyle you have planned for him, this might include the sights and sounds of trains, garbage trucks, schoolyards of screaming children, crowds, cats, livestock, or crying infants. While it's impossible to expose a young puppy to absolutely everything he will ever encounter in life, the more bases that you cover during the peak socialization period of 3 to 12 weeks, the more likely the puppy will be able to generalize from his prior experiences and find something reassuringly familiar in a new situation. 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 surely be a part of his daily life.

Do I Need to Do Anything Special When I Socialize My Puppy?

Yes! 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. For instance, maybe you've planned a puppy party where a group of people will gather to help you socialize him right at home. But some puppies can be overwhelmed by meeting a bunch of strangers all at once. Even though your intentions are good, if your puppy is cowering in the corner at his own party, then he's not learning anything good about strangers! The rule of thumb with puppy socialization is to keep a close eye on his 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.

What If My Puppy Seems Frightened During Socialization?

Even though 3 to 12 weeks old is a time when puppies are *most* comfortable with new experiences, they might sometimes find a new experience frightening. Whenever this happens, it's important to introduce him to the scary situation *much* more 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 him 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. (For more detailed information, please read our article, [Fear of 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 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, sound CDs, and theatrical costumes to accustom them 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. Just be sure to do your homework and ask questions of the instructor, including whether smaller play pairings are possible in the class setting. Some sensitive puppies may feel overwhelmed by a group of other pups who come on too strong or play too roughly. Pairing puppies by size is also important, as a tiny chihuahua could be easily trounced by a goofy lab puppy.

Vaccinations and Disease Risk During Early Socialization

Most young puppies aren't fully protected against the diseases we vaccinate them for until they've had all of their puppy shots. This is mainly because the antibodies they get from their mother can interfere with the ability of the vaccine to have its full effect. Even though puppies' immune systems are still developing during their early months, if we wait until he has all of his shots before socializing him, we miss our chance to do it. He'll simply be too old. The good news is that if you take some common-sense 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, like fearfulness and aggression, later in life.

Vets specializing in behavior recommend that guardians take advantage of every opportunity to socialize young puppies in environments like puppy classes, where the risk of illness can be minimized. They state that:

“Puppy socialization classes offer a safe and organized means of socializing puppies. Each puppy should have up-to-date vaccinations and be disease and parasite free before entering the class. Where possible, classes should be held on surfaces that are easily cleaned and disinfected (e.g., indoor environments). Visits to dog parks or other areas that aren't sanitized or are highly trafficked by dogs of unknown vaccination or disease status should be avoided.”

People with parcels, capes, sacks									
People with strollers, wagons									
People of various ethnicities									
Kids at school grounds									
Crowds, clapping, cheering									
People yelling, loud speakers									
People dancing, singing									
Livestock, waterfowl									
Other puppies, friendly adult dogs									
Other pets									
Traffic, busses, trains, motorcycles									
Boats, jet skis, snow mobiles									
Manhole covers, grates									
Shiny floors, tiles, icy streets									
Gravel, cement, mud, puddles									
Revolving signs, swinging bridges									
Walks after dark, in bad weather									
Hot air balloons & airplanes									
Lawn mowers, power tools									
Elevators, automatic doors									
Balconies, stairs									
Drive-throughs, car washes, tunnels									
Electrical appliances, washers									
Vacuum cleaners, hair dryers									
Construction and machinery noises									
Wind, rain, thunder, snow									
Fireworks, sporting events, fairs									
Veterinary hospitals and clinics									

Final Remarks

Socialization is essential for helping your puppy develop into a happy, fun, and safe companion. Most people find it easier and more enjoyable to live with a dog who's relaxed with strangers, gets along well with dogs, and adapts easily to new experiences. While some dogs are born with genetic predispositions that can make this difficult or impossible, most dogs are very impressionable when young and can learn to take everything in stride. Socializing your puppy gives him the greatest chance possible to develop into a dog who's comfortable in his environment and a joy to be with.