

Socialization Tips for Puppy Owners

Even though dogs have been domesticated for thousands of years, each new puppy that comes into our world must learn about humans. Socialization is the process during which puppies develop positive relationships with other living beings. The most sensitive period for successful socialization is during the first 3 – 4 months of life. The experiences the pet has during this time will have a major influence on its developing personality and how well it gets along with people and other animals when it grows into adulthood. It is very important for puppies to have frequent, positive social experiences during these early months in order to prevent asocial behavior, fear, and biting. Puppies that are inadequately socialized may develop irreversible fears, leading to timidity or aggression. This is not to say that socialization is complete by 4 months of age; only that it should begin before that time. Continued exposure to a variety of people and other animals, as the pet grows and develops, is also an essential part of maintaining good social skills. It is also extremely important that your new puppy be exposed to new environments and stimuli at this time (e.g., sounds, odors, locations, sights, surfaces) to reduce the fear of the unfamiliar that might otherwise develop as the pet grows older.

Puppy socialization – what to do

It is essential that every puppy meets as many new people as possible (including babies, children, adults, and seniors), in a wide variety of situations, but be careful not to overwhelm it. Begin with calm introductions to one or two people at a time. If the pet handles this well, then more people, increased noise, and more activity can be added. It can be beneficial to ask each person who meets the puppy to give it a small piece of kibble or a tiny treat. This will teach the puppy to look forward to meeting people. It will also discourage handshyness, since the puppy will learn to associate new people and an outstretched hand with something positive.

Once the puppy has learned to sit on command, have each new friend ask it to sit before giving the treat. This teaches a proper greeting and will make the puppy less likely to jump up on people. You should make certain that the puppy has the opportunity to meet and receive biscuits from a wide variety of people, especially those who differ from those in the family home. In the case of puppy socialization, variety is definitely the spice of life. The fear that might arise from the way a person looks, acts, sounds, moves, or perhaps even smells might be prevented by exposure during the socialization period. In particular, every effort must be made to see that the young pup has plenty of opportunities to learn about children. They can seem like a completely different species to dogs since they walk, act, and talk much differently than adults. Running, screaming, bicycles, roller blades and skateboards are also some of the varied stimuli that might be more common when children are around. Puppies that grow up without meeting children when they are young may never feel comfortable around them when they become adults. In addition, if you consider that perhaps you might want your pet one day to be a service or visitation dog, the range of possible sights, sounds, smells, actions, and interactions to which your dog might be exposed could also include riding on elevators, the sounds of hospital equipment, wheelchairs or the patient in a nursing home with a cane, walker, oxygen tank, or iv pole. Lack of experience with a variety of people during puppyhood is a common cause of social fear, avoidance, and biting.

Take the pup to visit friends' homes to interact with them and with their pets. The ideal home is one with calm children and calm pets that don't go out to parks or other areas where they might pick up disease organisms and bring them back home, and where the pets have received appropriate immunizations and parasite control. As soon as your veterinarian determines that your puppy is adequately vaccinated, take it on as many walks and outings as possible. Just be careful to avoid areas where stray dogs roam that might carry diseases.

Puppy classes

Attending puppy classes during the primary socialization period (which begins to wane by 12 – 14 weeks of age) is another excellent way of ensuring multiple contacts with a variety of people and other dogs. This relatively new concept in training involves enrolling puppies early, before they pick up bad habits, and at an age when they learn very quickly. Puppy training and socialization classes are now available in many communities where, with the proper healthcare precautions, puppies can be admitted as early as 8 – 10 weeks of age. These classes can help puppies get off to a great start with training, and offer an excellent opportunity for important social experiences with other puppies and a wide variety of people. Since there can be some health risks when exposing young puppies to other dogs and new environments, the best age to start your puppy in classes, and the best classes in your area, should be discussed with the family veterinarian. For further guidelines on puppy socialization and puppy classes, visit the American Society of Veterinary Behavior website at avsabonline.org.

Avoid unpleasant experiences

A young puppy's interactions should always be supervised to ensure nothing happens that might make it afraid of people. Go slow with socialization exposure, and if the pet ever seems anxious, take some time out and then re-expose it to people in slightly calmer situations.

In addition, avoid all physical punishment. Harsh scolding or punishing a young pet will damage its bond with you and weaken its trust in people. Techniques such as swatting the pup, shaking it by the scruff, rubbing its face in a mess, and roughly forcing it onto its back should never be used. Pets that are raised using these methods may grow up to fear the human hand, and are more likely to display avoidance or become fear biters. In general, any interactions with people that might make a puppy anxious should be avoided, particularly during the early months of its life. Socializing takes time and patience, but the benefits are worthwhile, so be sure not to miss the opportunity to guide your pup through this important process. Proper socialization will help ensure that your pet grows up to be social, friendly, and well adjusted.

Best wishes for a long and happy relationship!