Socialization

**The Importance of Early Puppy Socialization**

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Nothing is quite as exciting as finding just the right puppy. The next step for most new puppy owners is a shopping trip. You need a crate, dishes, appropriate toys, food . . . well, the list goes on and on.

But, before picking up that pup from the breeder, consider how you are going to make it part of your family. One of the most important aspects of planning for your new pup is often given little thought:

**What is socialization and why is it so important?**

Puppy socialization is the exposure and the experiences you give your pup to help it develop the skills necessary to interact appropriately with two-legged and four-legged critters. Your pup needs to know what is and what is not acceptable behavior when it meets people, dogs and other animals. By exposing your pup through a variety of controlled situations in its early life, you will be helping to insure a calm and confident adult.

Remember: genetics plays an important role in your pup's development of personality, character and temperament. So does the interaction your pup experienced with its dam and littermates. A good breeder will begin the foundation for puppy socialization when pups are only a few days old.

Not all pups are born equal. Some are little bullies, others may be shy or even fearful. A good breeder will ask about your family and training expectations before matching you with a pup.

A pup's temperament is not a clear indicator of what it will be like as an adult. Proper training during the early formative weeks will help build confidence and new skills, as well as overcome potential problem areas.

If your pup repeatedly demonstrates fear or aggression, then you must seek professional help.

**Imprinting, Habituation - What Are They?**

Many canine behaviorists have developed specific programs and activities that breeders and new owners can do with a puppy. Some call this "habituation" or "puppy programming." Others may call it "early imprinting" and go on to talk about using "a daily socialization calendar." Much of the information is the same, as is the purpose: to expose your pup to a variety of experiences within a controlled and positive environment in order to end up with a dog with stable nerves.

If you are a breeder, or if you desire more information about day-to-day activities for the first 16 weeks of your puppy's life, you may contact your veterinarian for referral to an animal behaviorist who is experienced and knowledgeable. He or she will be able to assess your individual situation and offer a very specific regiment suited to your ultimate training goals.

**Is One Exposure Enough?**

Puppies learn by repetition. Therefore, one exposure to traffic sounds will not ensure your dog is confident walking on leash down a busy street. You must repeat the experience at regular intervals, especially during the critical adolescent phase of development.

Note: Never begin socialization exercises that require your pup to be on leash, such as walking near traffic or meeting new animals, until the pup has been properly introduced to the leash and is comfortable walking on lead.

Remember: Make socialization work pleasant for both you and your dog. Although repetition is important, socialization lessons must take place over a period of weeks, and be repeated throughout the dog's adolescence. In this instance, a little is good - - and more can lead to disaster. Keep each session short and work on one thing at a time.

NEVER overwhelm the pup.

When you begin obedience training, proofing commands your pup already knows can be added into your adventures. Consistency and long-term repetition will "set" the exercises you've done for early socialization.

**A Word of Caution - Fear Periods:**

Canine behaviorists know that there are two fear periods during a pup's development. Although they may disagree about the exact dates and their lengths, the general consensus is that the first occurs somewhere between 7-12 weeks and the second about 17-21 weeks. The once confident and outgoing puppy may now be hesitant to approach new people or places. The shy pup may visibly tremble or back away from new experiences. Sensitivity to temperature, noise or rough play may be evident for the first time during a fear period.

Research has shown that this has little to do with when the puppy leaves the litter or with your home environment. Even when the litter is still together, pups will experience fear periods. Your job is to ease your puppy through new situations, rather than overwhelming him or her.

For example: If you want to introduce the pup to mature dogs, select one very calm, leashed, obedience trained dog who has the patience and experience to deal with a wiggling pup. It isn't wise to place your pup in the backyard of a friend or neighbor who has 3 or 4 grown dogs just to see how they will play.

During a fear period, don't over-react and isolate your pup. Instead, limit exposure to events where you can insure success and encourage your pup with praise and rewards. Remember to control the environment and the activities until the pup is once again seeking out new experiences and regaining confidence. And don't forget to praise your pup and hand out lots of treats.

Make certain your timing is correct: praise when the pup is accepting the new situation or person. Never pet, coddle or reward the pup when it is acting fearful - - or you will reinforce the fear-based behavior.

**How Do I Begin?**

Most breeders will want to keep the pups until after the 7th week. With some breeds, this may be even longer. By then, the pup has learned from its dam and littermates what it means to be a dog. Through play, pups learn about dominance, submission and even mating behaviors. Puppy play also serves to stimulate development of the physical body, the brain and neural network throughout the spinal column, as well as the senses.

Hopefully, your pup has been handled from nose to tail, daily, and has been exposed to a variety of people - children, adults, males and females by the time the pup is placed into your home environment and begins to experience the "real world."

Note: Review your plan for socialization with an experienced trainer or mentor before you start. It is much better to prevent a problem than to accidentally create a behavior that must later be eliminated.

The first twenty-one weeks of a pup's life are critical. Experiences, both positive and negative, can impact the dog for a long, long time. That's why you should not to let this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to socialize your puppy pass by.

Here is a brief outline of activities to begin proper puppy socialization. Before placing your pup with other dogs, be certain to check with your veterinarian about necessary immunizations and precautions to insure continued good health.

WARNING: Canine Parvo Virus is epidemic in some parts of the United States. Be certain to have your pup's complete inoculations prior to exposing it to other dogs and areas, such as parks, where other dogs frequent. Check with your veterinarian for tips to minimize your pup's risk to exposure of any contagious disease.

**Basic Socialization Checklist:**

* Touch: Be certain to touch your pup from head to toe daily. Gently place your fingertip inside the mouth and ears. Lift the tail and touch the hindquarters, too. Talk softly and gently stroke the pup. When the pup looks forward to your touch, let other family members, and then supervised friends - especially children, do the same thing.
* Car rides: Hopefully, your breeder has already taken the pups for a car ride - - to the vet for a thorough check-up and for additional rides around the neighborhood. It is important to start with short rides and gradually increase the length of time your pup is in the car. This can make for a great traveling companion and eliminate carsickness.
* Grooming: As soon as your pup arrives home, have practice grooming sessions. Gently comb and brush the coat and lift each foot. Have your vet or his technician demonstrate the proper way to cut your pup's toenails and brush it's teeth. I've had dogs all my life and none of them ever had a dental cleaning due to regular tooth brushing. Reduced anesthesia and veterinary expenses were my rewards for teaching the pup to first accept my finger in its mouth and then a toothbrush with active-enzyme toothpaste made just for dogs.

Bath time need not be a struggle. Discuss frequency and choice of shampoos with your groomer or vet. Oftentimes, a clean rag dipped in warm water can freshen up a puppy. Be certain your pup doesn't catch a chill and bathe it indoors unless it is a very warm, summer day.

The proper introduction to a grooming routine can eliminate lifelong fears and phobias for your pet. If your pet will be dried with a commercial blower, this is the time to introduce noise and the airflow. Be careful: the sensitive skin of a young puppy requires "air only" or "very low" temperatures from your own blow-dryer.

* The Vet: Make certain to have your vet check the pup as soon as possible after bringing it home. Should any problems be evident, notify your breeder immediately.

Unless you are giving immunizations at home, the pup will quickly learn a trip to the veterinarian is not pleasant. De-program your pup by making some of those car rides fun trips to the vet - - a quick hello to a friendly receptionist or technician and passing out favorite treats can soon have any pup happy to pull into "that" parking lot.

* Noise: Do not isolate your pup from loud noises. Make certain to start softly and gradually increase noise levels. Having your pup in its crate or pen while watching television or listening to music is a great way to begin. Encourage your pet to accept the banging of pots and pans in the kitchen, etc.
* Traffic: Start by walking your pup on a street with only a few, intermittent cars and gradually stair-step to where the pup is walking past loud motorcycles, 18-wheelers and honking car horns. NEVER ATTEMPT TO TEST THE PUP BY SEEING JUST HOW FAR YOU CAN PUSH EXPOSURE.
* Crowds: Start by having one person approach the pup. The next outing, perhaps two people will approach - - one after another. Again, build gradually until your pup can sit outside a movie theater or an elementary school and watch the world go by and be accepting of repeated contacts, one after another, with strangers. Be certain to bring lots of treats and pass them out to strangers to ensure each encounter comes with a built-in reward.
* People: To insure a happy, well-adjusted adult dog, it is necessary to expose your pup to a variety of people. This means carefully planned introductions to people of all ages, both sexes, a variety of races and ethnic backgrounds, short, tall, thin, obese, soprano voices and loud laughs. Get the picture?

Your pup also needs to learn that people may wear hats, carry purses, open umbrellas, ride bikes, etc. Remember to give lots of positive encouragement and rewards for success.

* Other Animals: Puppy hood is a great time to discover ducks, bunnies, horses, cows, chickens and whatever else your dog may encounter as an adult. Take your pup out and about, on leash, and walk by farms where these animals will be seen and smelled.

Have you been told to wait until your puppy is over six months to begin socialization? Or until he has had all of his vaccinations?  Wrong!  Please read information on [vaccines and socialization](http://www.4pawsu.com/vaccinations.htm). https://academyfordogtrainers.com/blog/puppy-socialization-and-vaccination-a-balancing-act