

Socialization

Most dog owners know that you're supposed to "socialize" your dog—but what *is* socialization, and how do you do it correctly? Read on to learn some tips & tricks for socializing your dog & setting them up for success in the world!

What is Socialization?

Socialization is the process of exposing dogs to new environments & situations, & is a key element to the well-being of your dog. Through socialization, you help your dog develop skills to cope with new experiences in a positive way, which will in turn reduce your dog's overall stress. Socialization includes:

People - Different ages, sizes, genders, and ethnicities; people with glasses, hats, beards, and different clothing—anything you can think of!

Places - Different environments, such as urban areas, country settings, & everything in between.

Animals - Other dogs, dog-friendly cats, & other pets & animals.

Things - Noisy or moving appliances, cars, buses, fire hydrants, trees—practically anything can be a new experience for your pup, so don't assume it is something they have seen before!

Start 'em Young

Socialization is especially important during puppyhood, with the first critical socialization period at 8-12 weeks of age. Socialized pups are typically happier, friendlier, more predictable, & able to handle stress better. Under-socialized pups often grow up to become fearful, shy, anxious, & sometimes even fearfully aggressive adult dogs because they lack the skills to cope with new situations.

Socialization does not begin and end with puppyhood, it is a lifelong journey! Though the foundation for your dog's behavior is laid during the first few months, responsible pet owners reinforce social skills & continually expose their dog to new social experiences throughout the dog's life.

Safe Socialization

Exposure to new and novel experiences must be positive & as stress-free as possible. Here are some guidelines to keep things constructive:

Listen to Your Puppy's Feelings - Let your puppy approach new things on their own & let them take time to investigate things. Try leading by example & interacting with the new object yourself. Don't force your puppy into a new situation if they are reluctant—if the situation is just too scary, you can try again when the puppy is a bit older.

Trust Your Common Sense - Avoid situations that you think might result in a negative experience. For example, if you allow a child to hold your puppy, have the child sit on the floor to avoid the possibility of a wiggly puppy falling & getting hurt.

Not-so-Safe Socialization

While it is critical that your puppy be exposed to a variety of new experiences, certain precautions must be taken to prevent a potentially positive experience from becoming a negative or traumatic one.

Advocacy - When owners stand by & allow their dogs to play overly rough, or when dogs are scared or upset by a situation & owners don't intervene, dogs learn that they cannot trust their owners to protect them. Your dog's perception of safety is very important to them, so don't hesitate to step in and remove your dog from a situation they perceive to be unsafe.

Remember that danger will not always look the same to you as it does to your dog.

Traumas - A traumatic experience from puppyhood can create negative associations that cannot be fully understood, nor fully erased. Your puppy does not realize that a bad thing that happened once will not necessarily happen again. Be patient & allow plenty of time for growth.

Learned Disobedience - A lack of consistency in training & obedience teaches a dog that their owner has no control over them. Even when encountering new situations, consistently enforce the behaviors you expect of your pup.

Ideas for Socializing Your Dog

Parks - Nothing beats a walk in the park! Bring plenty of treats, and when people ask to pet your dog, ask if they would like to give your dog a treat, too! Be careful not to let your pup meet EVERY person though. You want to be sure that they understand meeting new people happens only when you say so, and that it's okay to NOT say hi to everyone.

Nature Trails - These are great for exercise, meeting new people, & encountering different kinds of animals.

Outdoor Events - Don't be afraid to expose your pup to youth sporting events, small festivals, or fundraising walks.

Puppy Parties - A puppy is a great excuse to host a small party & invite a few friends over each time!

Pet Stores - An all-around great opportunity to see lots of new things. Use caution around unknown dogs, as not all are friendly to puppies.

FAQs

Should I bring my puppy to the dog park to socialize them?

A dog park is like a cocktail party where you don't know anyone & everyone is drunk—it could be fun, but it could be a disaster! When you combine a new space, lots of new dogs, & owners that may or may not recognize inappropriate play behavior or know when to intervene, you get a recipe for negative socialization experiences. Because dog parks are such a mixed bag, it's best to wait to wait until your pup is a bit older & to make sure they are happy & confident around other dogs before visiting one.

What about doggie daycare?

Doggie daycare is a more controlled play environment but is still an environment designed for dogs that are used to other dogs & find group play enjoyable. Puppies in the 8-12 week socialization period often find daycare to be a bit much but

might learn to enjoy it once they are closer to 4 months, if not older. Of course, some just don't enjoy group play & never will, but that's not a bad thing! It just means different methods of exercise & enrichment are in order.

Are there any programs that can help me socialize my puppy?

Consider enrolling your pup in puppy-specific training classes! These classes typically provide supervised puppy social play & include tips on the wide range of activities a puppy should experience during the socialization process.

Additionally, Paws & Claws offers puppy socials for pups between 2-6 months of age from 11 am-12 pm on the 1st and 3rd Saturday of every month! These supervised group play sessions allow little ones to experience off-leash play with dogs of similar sizes and stages of development.

I just adopted a new dog & don't know their background. How do I start the socialization process?

Start small with walks around the neighborhood & close observation of your dog's response to people, dogs, & other stimuli. It's important that a newly adopted dog becomes comfortable with their new home, family, and routine before all else, so allow them at least three weeks to adjust before progressing to new environments

I have an adult dog who missed out on puppyhood socialization. How can I help them catch up?

Older dogs who received little or negative socialization experience during their puppyhood socialization windows may always have some social aversions, but it's never too late to help your dog become more well-rounded! Your best bet is to consult with a professional trainer with experience in behavior modification as you follow the guidelines outlined above.

