

Socializing Your Puppy

By Sherry Woodard

Puppies and dogs need to be socialized to the big wide world so that they won't be afraid of new situations, objects, sounds, people and other animals. Dogs should be socialized when they are puppies – it's critical to their lifelong emotional well-being and their ability to be comfortable in the world.



There are a few guidelines to follow, however. Until the puppy has been vaccinated, you don't want him to be around other unvaccinated animals, since he may pick up diseases (such as parvo, distemper, and hepatitis) that can be fatal to puppies. Consult your veterinarian about when and how to safely introduce your puppy to other animals.

Even before vaccinations are complete, however, you can begin socializing your pup. Puppies can safely be around other vaccinated animals in your home. It can be fun to introduce the new addition to your family by having friends over for a small party. Your puppy can become accustomed to people who are loud or quiet, young or old, tall or short, active or inactive. Introduce your puppy to people wearing hats, glasses or sunglasses, helmets, coats or capes with hoods up, gloves and masks. You can also take the puppy on short car rides, so she'll be a good traveler from an early age.

Be careful to make all of your puppy's socialization experiences positive. If something or someone seems to frighten your pet, introduce that object or person more slowly, and associate the object or person with positive things. For example, if your puppy is afraid of someone wearing a big hat, have the person with the scary hat offer treats to the puppy. Soon, the puppy will associate the hat with something good instead of something scary.

You should also gradually introduce your puppy to a variety of household items and sounds, such as:

- The sound and movement of the vacuum cleaner, broom or mop
- TV and radio noise (play a variety of types of music)
- The noises made by whistles and children's toys
- The sound of electrical appliances, like a blender, fan or hair dryer
- The sound and motion of a kite or a plastic bag rippling in the breeze
- The sound of a balloon as air is allowed to escape
- A CD or tape recording of storm sounds (played at low volume)

Start early with getting your puppy comfortable with handling and grooming. Touch all her body parts: Open her mouth, look in her ears, hold her tail for a moment, wiggle your

fingers between her toes. Hold the pup on your lap and hug her for 10 seconds. To help her practice being calm, massage her whole body and have the puppy relax with you until she falls asleep. Friends and family can help by handling the puppy, too.

Using positive reinforcement (treats and praise), introduce a brush, comb, and dog nail clippers. If you plan to use a professional groomer, introduce your puppy to the sound of electric hair clippers at home first.

When the puppy is eight weeks old, other animals who are healthy, vaccinated and friendly can come to your home, and you can work on socializing your puppy to them. After you have your veterinarian's blessing to take the puppy out into the world, you can introduce the pup to the delights of going for walks in the neighborhood or to the park, and visiting other people's homes, where the puppy can get used to different types of flooring and stairs. Your puppy also needs to learn not to be startled by bikes, skateboards, shopping carts and wheelchairs.

If you have more than one pet, make a point to spend time with your puppy one-on-one. The individual attention can prevent the pup from becoming codependent on another animal in the household. To be emotionally healthy, a dog needs to form his/her own personality.

Finally, to enhance your dog's socialization skills, do basic training. Teach your puppy to take treats gently, and to play with his toys (not your hands). You can make walks fun for both you and your dog by teaching him to walk nicely on lead. He should also be taught basic commands, such as "sit," "down" and "stay." If you are conscientious about socializing and training your puppy, he will be happier, more welcome, and more comfortable in our busy, often chaotic human world.

Sherry Woodard is the dog training and care consultant at Best Friends. She develops resources and provides consulting services nationally to help achieve Best Friends' No More Homeless Pets mission.

See also: Pulling on the Leash
Positive Reinforcement: Training with Praise and Rewards
How to Educate Your Dog