

Socialize your puppy

The most important thing new puppy parents need to do is socialize their puppy. Behaviorists, dog trainers and veterinarians agree that the first three or four months of life is when sociability outweighs fear, so this is the best time to carefully introduce your puppy to as many new “stimuli” as is practical.

Every puppy’s socialization “to do” list will differ based on the owner’s lifestyle, but generally includes exposure to people, dogs and other animals, moving objects like bicycles or skateboards, indoor appliances like vacuum cleaners and ceiling fans, handling and being touched, walking on different surfaces in different environments and noises like thunder or fireworks.

For an extensive check list, search on “Dr. Sophia Yin puppy socialization checklist.”

Puppy class

Puppy class is an excellent way to socialize your puppy. Unfortunately, attendance in puppy class is often discouraged until the puppy is fully vaccinated, which is usually after the prime socialization window closes.

The American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior believes the risks are worth the reward. “Incomplete or improper socialization during this important time can increase the risk of behavioral problems later in life including fear, avoidance and/or aggression. Behavioral problems are the greatest threat to the owner-dog bond. In fact, behavioral problems are the number one cause of relinquishment to shelters. Behavioral issues, not infectious diseases, are the number one cause of death for dogs under three years of age.

“While puppies’ immune systems are still developing during these early months, the combination of maternal immunity, primary vaccination, and appropriate care makes the risk of infection relatively small compared to the chance of death from a behavior problem.”

It is always best to confer with your vet; most training organizations require a minimum of two DHPP shots, a Bordetella vaccination and clean fecal before accepting a puppy in class.

Socialize before being fully vaccinated

How can you socialize your puppy safely before he is fully vaccinated? The socialization process uses classical conditioning to teach our dogs that “stuff” isn’t scary. By pairing sightings of people and dogs with food, for example, dogs learn when a human or dog appears, good things happen!

* Sit on your front porch; as people, dogs, bicycles or cars go by, use classical conditioning to teach your puppy that these things aren’t scary and result in good things happening like verbal praise, petting or treats.

* Drive to your veterinarian’s office, a pet store or dog park. Park in the back of the lot and stay in your car. As people arrive with their dogs, start treating your dog. When the owners and dogs are inside, stop treating. Dogs make good things happen!

* Get a dog stroller and take your puppy out for a ride in public. If your puppy is small enough, carry him in a dog sling (similar to a baby sling) and let your puppy meet new people safely that way.

* Take your puppy to dog friendly businesses like your local Ace Hardware or Home Depot and put your pup safely on a blanket in the shopping cart. Shoppers and employees alike love to pet puppies.

* Take your puppy with you when you go through a drive-through to do your banking, pick up an order from a store or grab some food to go. (This will also get your dog used to car rides.)

* Invite friends into your home to meet your puppy or better yet, take your puppy to their home to experience a new environment.

* Set up play dates with friendly and fully vaccinated dogs in your home or yard.

Socializing older pups

It's never too late to start socializing your dog; it's just easier when done while your dog is young and fearless.

Socialization should ideally continue throughout your dog's life, so include your dog in your outings and social endeavors as we all adjust to getting back to normal activities.

Happy training!