

Puppies: Socialization/Adjustment

Like children, puppies need a variety of positive experiences in order to become confident, well adjusted adults. As part of their upbringing, puppies should learn to get along with other dogs, children, and other people, and to accept the many strange sights, sounds, and experiences that are part of everyday life.)

Stages of Development:

Puppies pass through several developmental phases. Initial "dog socialization" begins in the litter. At seven to eight weeks, puppies start to become more independent and ready to explore their environment. This is a very good age to bring your new puppy home. Around eight to ten weeks, your puppy will probably enter a fear period. During this period, you will notice that your puppy sticks close to you and is easily frightened. Avoid loud noises or surprises during this period, and keep new experiences very non-threatening. Once the fear period passes, at around ten weeks of age, your puppy will enter the juvenile phase. He will be more inquisitive and more wide ranging in his explorations. This is a very good time to introduce new experiences! The juvenile period will last until your puppy becomes a young adult. Watch your puppy carefully, though; some pups go through a second fear period around their fourth or fifth month.

When socializing your puppy, you must keep his health needs in mind. Until your dog's vaccinations are complete, he is at risk of catching Parvo, a widespread and deadly disease. You should be extremely careful not to put your puppy down in public places until his shots are complete. Consult your veterinarian for advice about what else may pose a health risk for your puppy.

Getting Along With Other Dogs:

Dogs have a language of their own. Using body posture, facial expressions, and vocalization, they communicate fear, anger, aggression, submission, playfulness, and more. A puppy who grows up among other dogs will learn canine language and be able to communicate effectively. A puppy raised in isolation may misinterpret cues from other dogs, or inadvertently send signals that may anger another animal.

Also, like children, puppies need to learn appropriate social behavior. When puppies play, an overly enthusiastic nip results in a yelp from another puppy. Persistent jumping on "mom" may result in a growl or snap of rebuke. In these ways, puppies learn the limits of play behavior.

A good way to give your puppy these important learning experiences is through "puppy socialization classes." Look under Dog Trainers in your phone book, or ask your local dog club or veterinarian for recommendations. You may also be able to get together with other new dog owners to form a puppy play group.

During socialization, puppies should be allowed free play time. Puppies should be supervised to make sure puppy play doesn't become overly aggressive, especially if there's a big size difference among the dogs.

Puppy socialization with other dogs begins in the litter, and should continue (if possible) throughout the puppy and juvenile growth stages. A well socialized puppy will probably mature into a dog who can be trusted to meet and play with other dogs. Note that socialization is even more important for dog-aggressive or dominant breeds. However, if you find your puppy becoming overly aggressive or overly afraid during play sessions, you should seek help from a professional dog trainer to make sure the behavior is corrected before it becomes a problem.

Getting Along With Other Pets:

For many dogs, interaction with other types of pets can be much more of a problem than dealing with other dogs. This is especially true with small animals that run away (behavior which can trigger "prey instincts" in the dog). It's best to not take a chance on allowing dogs of any breed to play with small animals such as hamsters or rabbits. Although many dogs have learned to get along with such pets, is it really worth the risk?

Cats and larger pets are usually less at risk. If you have these pets in your home, the puppy should be introduced to them at an early age. Supervise the animals when they are together, and use praise or treats to reward your puppy for good behavior. (Don't forget to make the experience pleasant for the other pet as well.)

Dogs of many breeds, when raised with cats or other pets, learn to accept them. However, for some breeds with strong hunting instincts, there may always be a risk. It's safest to choose your dog breed carefully if you know you will have other animals in the house.

Getting Along With People:

Since dogs must live in a human world, it's important for them to deal well with people. Early, positive exposure to lots of strangers, with praise or rewards for good behavior, will help your puppy grow up to become a well-behaved dog.

Invite friends to your home to meet and play with your puppy. Ask adults to crouch down and avoid sudden movements when meeting your puppy... from the pup's point of view, a human is HUGE. If you don't have young children of your own, invite friends' or neighbors' children. (Be sure to instruct children in how to handle the puppy, and always supervise play!) Puppies who are not raised around children can develop aggressive behavior toward children when they grow older. Small children, who tend to run around and make high-pitched squealing noises, can trigger prey instincts in dogs who are not used to them. Some breeds don't do well with children because of the strong prey instinct; other breeds are very good with children. If you have small children in your home, this is a very important factor to consider when choosing a dog.

As soon as your puppy's shots are complete, begin taking him to public places such as parks, where he can meet lots of friendly people. Also, make a point of introducing your dog to people of different ages and races, people in uniforms, and so on; dogs may become very wary when confronted with people who seem "unusual" in any way.

It's important to remember that you are teaching your puppy to be comfortable with people, and to behave himself around them. Behavior that seems cute in a puppy, such as nipping and jumping, is no longer cute when the dog is an eighty pound adult! Whatever you don't want your dog to do as an adult, he should not be allowed to do as a puppy. Teach the puppy the behavior you want, and discourage the behavior you don't want. Gently but firmly correct unwanted behavior right from the start, and you'll have a well-behaved adult dog.

Your well-socialized dog can still be a good watchdog. Your dog is smart enough to distinguish between people who you welcome into your home, and people who should not be there.

Dealing With New Experiences:

Everyday experiences can be very frightening for your new puppy. A pan dropped in the kitchen, a vacuum cleaner, or a ride in the car can become traumatic events that the dog will try to avoid forever after.

To prevent this, introduce your dog to as many new experiences as you can think of. Use rewards and encouragement to make the experiences positive, so your dog doesn't develop fears. (Remember to keep new experiences very non-threatening, and avoid startling the puppy, during the fear period around eight to ten weeks.)

For example, to accustom your puppy to a vacuum cleaner, first allow him to explore and sniff it without turning it on. Praise him or reward him as he explores. Then, when your puppy is a comfortable distance away, you may start up your vacuum cleaner, stand near it, and call your puppy. If he approaches, encourage him and praise him, or give him a reward. Gradually encourage the puppy to come closer to the vacuum. Repeat this experience several times, with lots of praise and rewards, and your puppy will soon have no fear of the vacuum.

To get your puppy used to riding in a car, first get in the car with him and play with him, or give him a reward. On the next "outing," drive a few yards while someone holds your puppy and praises him. Work up to drives of a few minutes; keep them short so your puppy won't get sick. Afterwards, play with your puppy so he associates the car ride with a pleasant experience.

Other experiences to work on with your puppy include getting into his crate or kennel, walking on a leash, walking on different surfaces (such as tile, carpet, gravel, sand, grass, and snow), climbing steps, and hearing the doorbell and telephone ring.

You can use the same approach to accustom your puppy to experiences that might otherwise be ordeals for both of you! Try the reward approach when brushing your puppy, giving him a bath, and clipping his nails. You should also teach your puppy to let you handle his paws, his ears, his tail, and even open his mouth without a struggle. (Remember, start with very short sessions and use praise, play, or rewards to keep the experience fun.) This basic groundwork with your puppy will make life much easier when your vet needs to examine him!

Keep new experiences upbeat and positive, and your dog will soon be a confident and happy companion.

Recommended Readings:

Neil, David H. and Rutherford, Clarice. *How to Raise a Puppy You Can Live With*. Alpine Publications, Loveland, Colorado, 1981.

The Monks of New Skete. *The Art of Raising a Puppy*. Little, Brown and Company, 1991.