

# PUPPY SOCIALIZATION: WHY, WHEN, AND HOW TO DO IT RIGHT

Socializing your puppy is key to ensuring you'll have a happy, confident, and well-adjusted dog for life. Below, learn the best time to socialize your puppy, how to do it right, and why it's important.

## WHEN TO SOCIALIZE YOUR PUPPY

From **7 weeks to 4 months of age**, your puppy goes through a socialization period that permanently shapes his future personality and how he will react to things in his environment as an adult. Gently exposing him to a wide variety of people, places, and situations now makes a huge, permanent difference.

Also, it's important to note that when you buy a puppy from a responsible breeder, the process can start even earlier. Gentle handling by the breeder in the first several weeks of your puppy's life is helpful in the development of a friendly, confident dog. At as early as **3 weeks of age**, puppies may begin to approach a person who is passively observing them, and having a knowledgeable breeder to encourage a positive experience with people is beneficial to the puppy's adult behavior.

## WHY TO SOCIALIZE YOUR PUPPY

The idea behind socialization is helping your puppy become acclimated to all types of sights, sounds, and smells in a positive manner. Proper socialization can prevent a dog from being always fearful of children, for example, or of riding in a car, and it will help him develop into a well-mannered, happy companion.

Also, having a dog who is well-adjusted and confident can even go as far as to save his life one day. According to the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior, improper socialization can lead to behavior problems later in life. Also, the organization's position statement on socialization reads: "Behavioral issues, not infectious diseases, are the number one cause of death for dogs under three years of age." If your

dog becomes lost or if something happens to you, the fact that he's easily able to accept new places and people can better ensure he'll be cared for until you're located or rehomed if necessary.

## HOW TO SOCIALIZE YOUR PUPPY

As mentioned earlier, your breeder will start the socialization process as early as the puppy's first few days of life by gently handling him and allowing him to explore his curiosity. But when the puppy comes home with you, **the crucial socialization period begins**, so it's important to continue this process. Here are the basic steps to follow:

**Introduce him to new sights, sounds, and smells:** To a puppy, the whole world is new, strange, and unusual, so think of everything he encounters as an opportunity to make a new positive association. Try to come up with as many different types of people, places, noises, and textures as you can and help your puppy be exposed to them. That means, for instance, have him walk on carpet, hardwood, tile, and linoleum floors; have him meet an old person, a young person, a person wearing sunglasses, a person carrying crutches. Think of it as a scavenger hunt.

**Make it positive:** Most importantly, when introducing all of these new experiences to your puppy, make sure he's getting treats and praise so that he associates what he's being exposed to with the feeling of seeing something new as a fun thing. Also, don't be stressed yourself — **dogs can read our emotions**, so if you're nervous introducing your puppy to a larger dog, for example, your puppy will be nervous, too, and may become fearful of larger dogs in the future.

**Involve the family:** By having different people taking part in the socialization process, you're continuously taking the puppy out of his comfort zone, letting him know that he might experience something new no matter who he's with. Make it a fun game for the kids by having them write down a list of everything new the puppy experienced that day while with them, such as "someone in a baseball cap" or "a police siren."

**Take baby steps:** Try to avoid doing too much too fast. For instance, if you want your puppy to get accustomed to being handled by multiple people he doesn't know, start with a few family members and slowly integrate one stranger, then two, and so on. Starting this process by taking your puppy to a huge party or a very busy public place can be overwhelming and result in a **fearful response** to groups of strangers in the future.

**Take it public:** Once your puppy is used to the small amounts of stimuli, move outside of his comfort zone to expand the amount of new experiences he'll have. Take him to the pet store (after he's started **his vaccination series**), over a friend's house for a puppy play date, on different streets in the neighborhood, and so on. At seven to ten days after he's received his full series of **puppy vaccinations**, it's safe to take him to the dog park (but be sure to **follow dog-park safety protocol** when doing so).

## WHAT ABOUT OLDER DOGS?

After all of this information on how important socialization is for puppies brings up the question "**what about older dogs?**" If you've acquired a dog later in life, you can still help him associate new or fearful situations with a positive experience, even though you've missed the crucial socialization period of 7 weeks to 4 months. Slowly reintroducing the dog to new sights, smells, and sounds, with careful supervision and an emphasis on positivity in the forms of praise and treats can help him overcome his fear or hesitation. (Severe cases of fearfulness should be treated with the help of a veterinarian and/or animal behaviorist.)

The **AKC's Canine Good Citizen** test is an excellent goal for owners of dogs who received little training in their past (or even for S.T.A.R. puppies who are ready to take their skills to the next level). This 10-test step demonstrates that a dog can show good manners and basic obedience.

Credit: <http://www.akc.org/learn/dog-health/puppy-socialization/>