Raising a Confident, Happy, Companionable, and Safe Dog

Puppy Socializing Basics

From the ***first week*** you get your puppy, it is critical that you start socializing him or her. Most experts agree that, at a minimum the critical socialization period refers to weeks 9 through 12. Many experts agree that because different breeds and individuals within the breeds will hit each period at different times, it is usually safe and advisable to extend the period from 8 to 16 weeks. Socialization refers to the safe, gentle and stress-free introduction to your puppy's new world. Unless he had an extraordinary breeder, most everything will be new and potentially scary to him. Normal dog behavior requires a distrust of new things. It's up to you to help your dog learn to expect the "unexpected" and be alert but not afraid.

- Introduction to his new world, including:*
  - All kinds of new people[1], such as:
    - Men and women
    - People of different races
    - People wearing hats
    - Men with beards
    - People carrying large things
    - Loud and timid people
    - People in wheelchairs
    - People on horseback
    - Children—lots of *well-behaved* children!

  - New things, sounds and animals, such as:
    - Balloons
    - Garbage cans/bags
    - Other well-behaved dogs (carefully!)
    - Cats
    - Horses
    - Baby strollers
    - Vacuum cleaners
    - Umbrellas

  - New situations, such as:
    - Riding in cars (gradually going longer distances)
    - Attending children's baseball games and playgrounds (protect him carefully!)

[1] However, allow him to have a low-key first few days at home. Don't be tempted to parade group after group of newcomers through the house for him to meet. Save the "puppy showers and parties" for the 2nd weekend at home!

by Tracey Schowalter, Puppy Adept, Inc., all rights reserved

        - Visiting stores with you (Check with local vendors to find out if puppies are allowed—point out that you can carry him, if necessary)
        - Walking through or sitting in busy areas like Virginia-Highlands, downtown Athens, or Little 5 Points or a local festival or crafts show which allows pets (carry your puppy or use a pet stroller if he is not yet fully immunized)
    - New surfaces:
        - Concrete
        - Pinestraw
        - Carpeting
        - Linoleum and other slippery floors (preferably before he has to experience your vet's floor)
        - Stairs
        - Ramps
        - Water
        - Uneven surfaces

- Handling:
    - You need to gently handle your puppy's feet, ears, mouth and tail *every* day
    - Periodically, ask others to do the same. Monitor closely (particularly with children) to ensure your puppy is not stressed or afraid and that he is, indeed, being handled very gently.

*All of these new introductions should be presented in the ***most positive*** **manner possible**. For instance, you never want to just toss your puppy into a pool and let him figure out how to swim. The introduction should be slow, and he should not seem frightened of any part of it. You can reward him with treats and soft praise as he bravely approaches the new thing. If he prefers not to approach, *do not* force him. Allow him to move further away from the new thing and reward him with treats and praise just for being in the vicinity of it. Have small children drop yummy treats on the ground for him. This helps keep him from being frightened of their quick, little reaching hands. Instruct others to allow your new puppy to come to them as they crouch down at his level.

It's **extremely** important that you protect your puppy from negative experiences. Don't be shy about controlling the introductions or removing him from potentially unpleasant situations. Learn to read your puppy's body language for signs of stress.

In puppies within this socialization period, impressions can be for life! Puppies who have been constantly introduced to new things with good or neutral experiences become unflappable, confident adults. By socializing him, you greatly reduce the potential for your dog to develop aggressive behaviors or

by Tracey Schowalter, Puppy Adept, Inc., all rights reserved

excessive shyness; this helps him to become the valued family-member you had hoped for.

Puppy Kindergarten?

It's very important that during this stage of his life you get your puppy into a puppy class with an instructor you feel comfortable with. A good puppy class can help you with many of the introductions mentioned above. The class should never be a big free-for-all. Any playtimes should be carefully supervised by you and your instructor; your puppy counts on you to protect him. Supervised playtimes are an excellent way for your puppy to learn how to appropriately interact with other dogs. The puppy class you choose should emphasize socialization, bite-inhibition, handling, and sometimes an introduction to very basic obedience, at the very least.

Just remember that a little extra time and effort on your part now will greatly reduce the possibility of heartbreak later. Problems caused by lack of proper socialization can cost you a great deal more time and money than you would have spent on positive socialization. Don't wait until it's too late!

by Tracey Schowalter, Puppy Adept, Inc., all rights reserved