

Socialising your Puppy

Socialisation is the term used to describe how a dog learns to relate to people, other dogs and his environment. Your dog will keep on learning throughout his whole life, but Puppyhood is the time when experiences--good or bad--have the biggest impact on him. These experiences are critical to your Puppy's future, and will have a long-lasting effect on his behavior throughout his life.

When you get a Puppy, make sure you have time to invest in an intensive socialisation program during his early weeks with you. Socialising your Puppy is very important, and a worthwhile investment in your own and your Puppy's future, as you're laying the foundation for the dog's behaviour later on in life. In this case, it's very true that prevention is much better than cure. Also, socialising your Puppy is great fun, and serves as an excellent chance for you to get to know him really well.

Let's take a look at how you can socialise your Puppy:

When to start

Start socialising your Puppy as soon as you get him. Don't worry about his vaccination program being a hindrance to socialisation. Using your imagination, you can still start socialising your puppy without compromising his vaccinations. How? You can do much of the early socialisation in your home. Also, you can minimise the risk of your Puppy contracting an infectious disease by carrying him when he's outside your home.

Situations where your Puppy will need to be comfortable

Think of all the situations and environments that your Puppy will need to be comfortable in: riding in the car, meeting the mailman, having contact with the children next door (and children in general), walking along the street, tolerating large trucks and cars, large animals such as horses, vacuum cleaners, and washing machines - to name just a few.

You are basically aiming at preparing your Puppy for all eventualities so that whenever he encounters anyone or anything new, he'll greet it with inquisitiveness rather than fear or aggression. Expose your Puppy to all sights and sounds gradually, and allow him to explore and learn for himself; for example, switch on the vacuum cleaner in another room to avoid startling him with a sudden loud noise, and let him go find it. Make sure that when he finds the vacuum cleaner, this is a rewarding rather than a threatening experience. You can easily do this by placing a piece of food next to the vacuum cleaner. If your Puppy is quite shy and frightened, you can start off by placing a snack next to the switched-off vacuum cleaner, and then work your way towards your Puppy tolerating it when the machine is switched on.

It's essential that your dog be completely comfortable being with people and children. So introduce him to all sorts of different people. Let him meet people of all descriptions: bearded, thin, overweight, tall, wearing hats or glasses, carrying bags, pushing bicycles, etc.

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Situations where your Puppy will need to be comfortable (Cont'd)

It is, however, important that children be taught the rules of handling puppies; an adult should always supervise children and dogs. Dogs may actually see children as a different species than adults, because they move differently, speak differently and react differently than adults. Start slowly by spending time in and around children's parks where your Puppy will learn the sights and sounds of children playing. Start by having just a few children around your Puppy, then build up to a larger number.

It is, of course, unrealistic and even impossible to expose your young dog to everything he's likely to meet in the future. However, if you can teach him that new experiences are pleasant, he will grow up learning that unknown things and situations are something to explore, rather than to be fearful of. But don't be surprised if your previously confident Puppy starts to show apprehension towards objects he was fine with during his juvenile period (at approximately 14 months of age, depending on the breed), since this can be normal in some dogs at this age. If this happens, it's important that you carry on with your socialisation program by regularly re-exposing the young dog to novel experiences.

Interacting with other dogs

It's also essential that your Puppy learn to interact with other dogs correctly. Puppies, like all young animals, love to play, and games play a vital part in a dog's development. Dogs develop their canine communication skills through playing with other dogs as Puppies.

Through playing, dogs learn the behavior of not biting. When puppies play physical games, they soon learn that a litter mate, or adult dog will not tolerate sharp teeth pulling on ears or necks. If a Puppy "bites" another dog too hard, he will get a quick reprimand, with the other dog stopping the game for a brief moment. A Puppy soon learns to limit the strength of his "bites", and will stop biting too hard when he's playing with other dogs.

You and your family should continue teaching your Puppy not to bite. Whenever your Puppy uses his teeth on your skin, you should respond with a sharp yelp of pain (even if it doesn't hurt!), as this will teach your Puppy to learn that touching human skin with his teeth is not allowed, no matter how gentle he is. Also, the game you and your puppy were playing should stop for a moment, which will help your puppy quickly learn that to continue having fun he must not "bite" you.