

Columbia Animal Clinic

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Puppy Behavior and Training – Socialization and Fear Prevention

What is socialization?

Technically, socialization refers to introducing puppies to other social species. More commonly, socialization is used to describe the exposure of puppies to an assortment of stimuli and experiences they might encounter in their adult lives. This exposure is like a vaccination for physical disease—by providing safe, controlled social exposures to unfamiliar people and situations, we inoculate them from developing fearful behavior.

During socialization, puppies become acclimated or habituated to various stimuli and situations. Puppies learn social skills during carefully controlled, safe interactions with people, dogs, and other animals. They also learn how to explore their world.



While dogs can and do experience social learning throughout their lifetimes, puppies are maximally primed for socialization between the ages of 3–14 weeks of age. This period is called the “sensitive period for socialization”. Initial socialization begins when a puppy is still with his mother and littermates—puppies naturally encounter many sounds and sights in their early environment.

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How do I socialize my puppy correctly?

Once your puppy joins your family, you must continue to provide opportunities for socialization. Puppies must have various positive, pleasant experiences in novel situations and be protected from fear-provoking conditions. Remember that this is a sensitive period for the puppy. Exposures must be done carefully, so the puppy remains calm and interested in engaging and does not become frightened or overwhelmed.

As a guideline, bring your puppy to a new place at least twice weekly. Allow your puppy to explore at his own comfortable pace. Bring tasty treats and some exciting toys to occupy him. This is the time to help your puppy learn about city streets and open parks. Let him experience bicycles and cars driving by and bring him into pet-friendly shops. Introduce cats and horses if they will be part of his life

Perhaps most importantly, let your puppy meet various people every week, including men and women, young and old. Find people with hats and canes. Introduce children that are old enough to be quiet and gentle with dogs. Give treats to people that want to meet your puppy, and then allow the puppy to approach at his own pace. Ask strangers to roll or toss treats to your puppy, and not to reach toward him to pet him but let him choose to approach when he is comfortable.

If a treat is offered and your puppy takes it very tentatively or approaches and then backs away before eating the treat, he may be fearful. You might create more fear if you continue to coax him with food this way. Instead, stop the interaction and try again another time, and ask the stranger to sit down and toss the treat without reaching or making eye contact.

For some puppies, every stimulus may seem overwhelming. If your puppy does not eat or play during a socialization session, he is telling you he is frightened. Take your puppy out of the situation and plan for a quieter session. Never force your puppy to 'face his fears' or thrust him into new situations when he seems panicked or fearful, as it may worsen the fear. Ask your veterinarian or behaviorist for some guidance. You must not continue to expose your puppy to situations that cause a fear response.

Is it safe to take my puppy out in public at such a young age?

Yes! There is a misconception that puppies must complete their full set of vaccinations before being socialized. Unfortunately, by the time your puppy finishes the vaccination series, the sensitive period for socialization will be almost over.

There is always a concern about the risks of taking a puppy out of his home before he is fully vaccinated because he may be exposed to an infectious disease before the protective immunity develops. However, the benefits gained from these early public experiences usually outweigh the risk of illness; without these experiences, the risk of developing permanent fears or anxiety is a serious concern.



You can minimize your puppy's health risks by having healthy people or pets visit him in his home or meeting in a neutral place where other dogs are not often walked. If you follow your veterinarian's recommended vaccination schedule, taking your puppy for walks along the sidewalk and avoiding neighborhood parks where stools and urine might accumulate is generally safe. The risk of missing socialization opportunities is very serious and should be carefully balanced with concerns about physical illness.

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What is habituation?

Habituation happens when a puppy grows accustomed to stimuli through repeated exposure at levels that do not produce fear. We experience habituation regularly in our lives. For example, if you move to a home near a railroad crossing, you might notice every train passing by at first. Within a short time, you will barely notice the sound—it will be another neutral noise in the background.

Similarly, puppies habituate to stimuli in the environment if they are not overwhelming. Habituation cannot occur if a puppy is frightened. If he shows concern by looking away, leaning away, moving away, hesitating to explore, and hesitating to approach, or exhibiting strong avoidance, bring him to a place where he feels safe and seek professional guidance. You may need to arrange a desensitization to certain scary stimuli.

What is desensitization?

Desensitization refers to deliberately but very carefully and systematically exposing your puppy to a stimulus at such a low level that he is not frightened. Once he is relaxed with the low level of exposure, the intensity can be slightly increased. When done correctly, desensitization will help your puppy habituate to something that might seem a little scary. Desensitization is the primary behavior modification technique used to treat fears in dogs of any age. If your puppy exhibits a high level of fear, it is best to seek professional guidance so the desensitization process can be done correctly.

For example, suppose your puppy is afraid of the coffee grinder:

- Keep him in another room while you grind the coffee. Have a helper play with him or feed him treats. Keep the grinding duration short—just a few seconds.
- After a few sessions, grind for a few more seconds. If your puppy is easily able to play and take treats, then move him a bit closer to the grinder but reduce the duration of the noise. Then gradually increase the duration of the noise.

These steps are quite small! Start small, watch for signs your puppy may feel overwhelmed or fearful, and only progress at his comfort level.

Do other factors contribute to a social, calm, and confident dog?

Puppy selection

Personality traits are determined by many factors, including genetics, the behavior and health of the mother, access to adequate nutrition during development, and the environment from shortly before birth until maturity. Many of these influences occur before you meet your puppy and may be unknown to you.

If you meet one or both parents, you may get some insight into the traits your puppy may inherit. If both parents are calm, your puppy is more likely to be calm.

If you adopt a purebred dog, you can select a breed known for being calm. Although there is a great deal of variation within a breed, some breed tendencies exist. Investigate the breeds that interest you and learn about their temperaments.

Early handling

Puppies stimulated and handled from birth to five weeks of age are more confident, social, exploratory, faster-maturing, and able to handle stress better as they develop. Puppies obtained from a breeder or foster home, where they have had frequent contact and interaction with people, are likely to be more social and less fearful as they develop. Puppies that spend a lot of time in a pet store, alone in a kennel, or confined to a cage may be at a disadvantage; introduce handling gradually and be aware of signs your puppy is distressed or overwhelmed.

Puppy assessment

Research shows that it is very difficult to fully predict the future behavior of a dog. Many puppy aptitude and personality tests have been developed, but to date, they mainly provide guidelines rather than guarantees. Personality can change over. It seems that puppies who are fearful and/or easily frustrated may be likely to continue exhibiting these traits into

adulthood. If you hope for a calm, confident dog, look for a puppy interested in meeting people and exploring novel objects. If you select a puppy that is shy or retreats from new stimuli, be prepared to start the socialization process immediately. You must keep all exposures comfortable enough that your puppy is not routinely frightened. Do not hesitate to seek professional guidance so that your puppy has the best chance of maturing into a calm and social dog.

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What is the best age to obtain a new puppy?

Since a puppy's interactions with his mother and littermates positively impact developing social skills, a puppy should remain with his mother and littermates until he is 7–10 weeks of age.

Even if your puppy is over 14 weeks, after the sensitive period of socialization is over, regular social interactions should continue throughout adulthood to ensure social skills remain strong and your older puppy can still acclimate to new stimuli.

What else can I do to assist my puppy's social development?

Ask your veterinarian to help you find a puppy socialization class. Suitable classes provide opportunities to interact with other people and dogs in a low-risk environment. Puppy socialization classes help puppies learn social manners, including the important skills of ignoring as well as politely greeting people and other dogs.

Find a class with a strong safety protocol where:

- Puppies must be up to date on vaccinations and boosters and free of intestinal parasites
- Puppies must have been in their new home for at least ten days and have appeared healthy since during this time
- Classes are held indoors, in a room that can easily be cleaned and disinfected

These steps will also reduce the risks of disease transmission.

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