

Texas Veterinary Behavior Services

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SOCIALIZATION IN PUPPIES

Your puppy's first weeks in its new home are some of the most important of its life. This time period will lay the groundwork for how your puppy will behave as an adult. All animals, including humans, undergo a critical process called socialization. This process allows an animal to develop normal social skills and learns to identify and interact with animals of its own and other species. Puppies with inadequate socialization are fearful of other animals, people, and/or novel environments. They do not handle stress well, and many will show aggression with little provocation.

In general, socialization can be defined as: graduated exposures to a variety of environmental stimuli in a controlled manner to affect a positive experience and increase social skills. This means that puppies should be introduced to as many different people, animals, places, and experiences as possible. This must be done in such a fashion that *the puppy is never frightened or traumatized by the experience*, because if this happens, the puppy may develop a life-long fear of that stimulus. While your puppy should receive significant exposure to various experiences, it is important that you do not overwhelm the puppy. Socialization should occur in short, brief exposures when possible to allow the puppy to rest in between outings. Do not try to socialize the puppy when it is tired or ill.

ALL puppies need socialization, but the amount of socialization required by an individual puppy varies somewhat with its age, breed, and genetic background. The optimum age to socialize your puppy is between 3 and 14 weeks. This means that you should NOT wait until your puppy has completed its entire puppy vaccination series before starting socialization efforts!! If you wait until the puppy has completed its vaccines (at 15-20 weeks of age), you will have missed the socialization window completely. Socialization can occur to some degree after this period, but it is less effective and requires considerably more time and effort to obtain a similar effect. Although 14 weeks is the upper end of the optimum period, socialization experiences should not stop at this age. As with any skill, if social skills are not "practiced" over the dog's lifetime, the dog will become less proficient at interacting with other people, animals, and places.

Below are some basic guidelines for ensuring your puppy has an adequate and rounded experience. Modifications to this outline will occur depending on what you expect your dog to do or encounter in the future. For example, a dog that may live on a farm in the future should be exposed to farm animals, whereas a dog that will live in the city permanently may not require this type exposure.

During the critical socialization period, your puppy should:

1. Meet a minimum of 7-10 new people each week and receive treats from each one. (not the same people each week)
2. Meet a minimum of 3-5 new (friendly!) dogs each week.
3. Have at least 3 exposures each week to any other animal your puppy might encounter regularly in the future.
4. Go to a minimum of 3 different environments each week.
5. Make one trip to the veterinary clinic each week, just to receive treats from the staff.
6. Be exposed to a variety of sights and sounds around the house and neighborhood.
7. Take a short ride in your car at least 2-3 times a week.
8. Take a 10 minute (or more) walk around your neighborhood at least twice a week. Ask any people you meet along the way to give your puppy a food treat.

This sounds like a large amount of work, but many of these objectives can be accomplished on the same outing.

During these socialization steps, it is critical that the puppy does not have a bad experience. It is important that you have enough knowledge about a situation and enough control over the situation to be able to prevent this from happening. If your puppy does become frightened by something, do not attempt to console the puppy. (However, you should provide *support* for the puppy. You are the puppy's "safe base" from which it will gain courage to explore and investigate new stimuli). Abort the situation as rapidly and calmly as possible—get the puppy away. Look for, or make, an opportunity to give the puppy a positive follow-up experience, even if it is not with the same stimulus.

Kindergarten puppy training classes are often an excellent way to meet some of the socialization requirements. Most classes begin puppies at 8-10 weeks of age. These classes give puppies an opportunity to meet other people and puppies and be exposed to various noises and objects. Basic training for "sit," "down," and "come" cues is usually started during this time. Puppy classes alone are not an adequate socialization experience for your dog, but they are an excellent contribution to your puppy's social experience.

Once your puppy has passed through the primary socialization period, you should continue the socialization process until the puppy is at least 18 months old. This will help to ensure that your puppy maintains its social skills throughout adolescence. Some dogs seem to go through an "insecure" or fearful phase between 6-12 months of age. If socialization does not continue in a positive manner through this period, your puppy may still become fearful of or aggressive toward other people and animals.

Raising a new puppy is a significant commitment, but this companion will be in your family for the next 10-15 years. Behavior problems are the most common reason that people euthanize or give away their pets. Dedicating extra effort to your puppy during its early development will reduce the risk of these behavior problems developing and enrich your relationship with your dog.