

Puppy Socialization: Why, When, and How to Do It Right

Liz Donovan

Socializing your puppy is key to ensuring you have a [happy](#), confident, and well-adjusted dog. Below, learn the best time for puppy socialization, how to do it right, and why it's important.

When to Socialize Your Puppy

During your puppy's first three months of life, they'll experience a socialization period that will permanently shape their future personality and how they'll react to their environment as an adult dog. Gently exposing them to a wide variety of people, places, and situations can make a huge, permanent difference in their temperament.

When you buy a puppy from [a responsible breeder](#), the socialization process should start before you even bring them home. 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. As early as 3 weeks of age, puppies may begin to approach a person who's passively observing them, so [having a knowledgeable breeder](#) who encourages a positive experience with people will help shape the puppy's adult behavior. As their puppies develop, good breeders allow them to experience safe inside and outside environments. They'll also likely expose them to car rides and crates, as well as different sounds and smells.

Why Socialize Your Puppy

The idea behind socialization is that you want to help your puppy become acclimated to all types of sights, sounds, and smells in a positive manner. Proper socialization can prevent a dog from being fearful of [children](#), for example. It will help them develop into a well-mannered, happy companion.

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Having a dog who's well-adjusted and confident can even go as far as to save their life one day. According to the [American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior](#), improper socialization can lead to behavior problems later in life. The organization's position statement on socialization reads: "Behavioral issues, not infectious diseases, are the number one cause of death for dogs under 3 years of age." Start taking your dog out to public places once your veterinarian says it's safe, and they'll

learn how to behave in a variety of situations and to enjoy interacting with different people.

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How to Socialize Your Puppy

As mentioned earlier, your breeder will start the socialization process. When the puppy comes home with you, your job is to keep the process going. Here are basic steps to follow:

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Introduce the puppy to new sights, sounds, and smells

To a puppy, the whole world is new, strange, and unusual, so think of everything they encounter 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 expose your puppy to them. That means, for instance, having them walk on [carpet](#), hardwood, tile, and linoleum floors, meet a young and old person, someone in a wheelchair or using a cane, a person with a beard, wearing sunglasses or a hood, and using an umbrella. Think of it as a scavenger hunt.

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Make it positive

Most importantly, when introducing all of these new experiences to your puppy, make sure they're getting [an appropriate amount of treats](#) and praise. As a result, the pet will associate these experiences with the feeling of seeing something new being a fun experience. Break treats into small pieces that will be easy for your puppy to digest. Also, try to remain calm — [dogs can read our emotions](#). So if you're nervous when introducing your puppy to an older dog, for example, your pet will be nervous, too, and may become fearful of other dogs in the future.

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Involve the family

By having different people take part in the socialization process, you continuously move the puppy out of their comfort zone. That lets the dog know that they might experience something new, no matter who they're with. Make it a fun game for 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."

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Take baby steps

Try to avoid doing too much, too fast. For instance, if you want your puppy to become accustomed to being handled by multiple people they don't know, start with a few family members. Then 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 can handle a small amount of stimuli, move outside of their comfort zone and expand the amount of new experiences they'll have. Take them to the pet store (after they've started their vaccination series), over to a friend's house for a canine playdate, on different streets in the neighborhood, and so on. At seven to 10 days after the dog has received their full series of [puppy vaccinations](#), you can safely take them to the dog park (but be sure to [follow dog park safety protocol](#).)

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Go to puppy classes

Once your puppy has started vaccinations, they can also attend puppy classes. These classes not only help your pet begin to understand basic commands, but they also expose them to other canines and people. [Skilled trainers](#) will mediate the meetings so that all dogs and people are safe and happy during the process. You can find puppy classes through local AKC training clubs and dog training facilities.

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