

So You Have a New Puppy - What Should You Do Now?

Socialization

Socializing a new puppy is the most important thing you can do to create a wonderful dog. It's easy, it's fun, and it's important!

Dogs have a sensitive period for socialization between the ages of 3 and 12 weeks. This means that **positive** experiences with different people, noises, situations, other animals, surfaces, anything different you can think of, will have long-lasting influences on the sociability of your dog. Well-socialized dogs tend to be friendlier and less fearful of the kinds of individuals and experiences they were socialized to.

Here are some steps you can take to socialize your puppy to something new to them:

1. Begin to introduce your puppy to the new experience from a distance, making it positive and fun for your dog using treats and/or toys.

If your puppy seems relaxed, gradually move closer, continuing to make it fun with treats and/or toys

2. Allow your puppy the chance to investigate new objects, smells, noises, surfaces, and textures. Don't drag them up to the new experience.

3. Seek out new people and ask them to give your puppy a treat. Try and have only one person at a time approaching your puppy initially. Puppies can often draw a crowd, and being surrounded by a lot of people, no matter how friendly, can be overwhelming to a dog.

4. Give your puppy a treat for investigating new things on his own.

If at any time during socialization your puppy is frightened (tries to run away, tucks his tail underneath flat against his belly, hides behind you, or snaps at you) do not coddle the puppy. Back away from the experience that is frightening him and work at a place where your dog can be comfortable. Once the puppy is far enough away from the experience to be relaxed, start from this point to build up your pup's confidence. The goal is for your puppy to be comfortable and confident around things that were previously scary to him.

Here are some ideas of what you might want to socialize your puppy to:

People: women, men, teenagers, children, toddlers, babies, people of all nationalities and race, people with peculiar gaits, handicapped individuals, uniforms, bearded men, people with hats, people acting weird. All the experiences with these people should be positive, using play or treats. A good suggestion is to have a "stranger treat bag" that you carry. Every time you meet someone new, ask that person to give your puppy a treat.

Situations: crowds (initially from a distance), kids on bikes, traffic, car rides, soccer games, floor textures, etc.



Other animals: especially other dogs, but also cats, squirrels, livestock, etc.

Things: umbrellas, furniture that moves (such as reclining chairs, and be cautious with these, please; them can injure your pup!), wheelchairs, walkers, the vacuum cleaner, etc.

Sounds: shaking open a trash bag, the vacuum cleaner, doorbells, door knocks, the lawn mower (from a safe distance), trucks backing up, fire engines, loud voices, etc.

Again, make positive associations with all of these experiences using food treats or play. Allow your pup to tell you when he is uncomfortable and needs to escape from fearful items.

Although the list of things you'd like to introduce your dog to is long, socialization sessions should be short. Resist the temptation to take your puppy out for hours at a time exposing him to everything you can find. You want to slowly expand your puppy's exposure to the environment and all the world has to offer. One or two short sessions (20 minutes or less) a day is a good way to manage it.

“Normal” Fear

Puppies experience normal fear periods as they develop into adults. These periods are most noted by the pup's fearful reaction to noises and other novel items and people. Items which frighten a pup during these times can make a permanent impression, so please be gentle with your pup should you see this behavior arise; ignore the fearful behavior, allow the pup to escape from what is frightening them, and give them lots of rewards for confident behavior. These normal fear periods will come and go sporadically as your pup matures into an adult.

Play with other dogs

It is important to allow puppies to play with other puppies and non-aggressive adult dogs. Interacting with appropriate puppies and older adult dogs (again all in a positive manner) helps your puppy learn proper canine social skills. Dogs that do not learn “dog language” are tense and antisocial and cannot read other dogs well. They are consequently, at higher risk for dog-dog aggression or fearful reactions to other dogs.

Appropriate play includes dogs that are taking turns chasing each other, rolling each other around, and play-bowing to each other. Do not allow other dogs or puppies to repeatedly hold your puppy down or bowl him over in rough play. If your pup looks as though he is not having fun, end the play session. Avoid exposing your puppy to dogs that may be dog-aggressive. If you are not sure if a dog will be aggressive towards your pup, it's best to keep your puppy away from them.

If you have a small breed dog it is important to let them meet other dogs on their own four feet, not from your arms.

Alone time

Dogs are social animals and genetically are not very well prepared to be alone. It is therefore very important to get your puppy used to being alone. Leave him alone for brief periods of time, over and over. Put him in his crate and leave the room, at first for a short amount of time, and then for longer and longer periods. Give him a chew toy to focus on while he is alone. When you leave, do not say “goodbye” or anything else to the puppy – just leave. When you come back, do not say “hello”, just come back in the room. If the puppy starts to cry or bark when you leave the room – DO NOT go back in. This will reinforce that behavior and he learns that crying brings you back. Wait for a lull in the crying or barking and then go back.

Physical handling

It is important to handle your puppy as much as possible. The puppy should be handled everyday, preferably by many people. They should stroke the entire body, look inside the ears and mouth, pick up the feet, etc.

In addition to normal handling it is essential to prepare the puppy to be handled in ways that they might find frightening or painful. Most people (and all children) act inappropriately around dogs because they do not understand the things that upset them. The number one bite provoker is some variation on a behavior that humans consider friendly – approaching and reaching toward the dog. Owners need to take the time to teach the puppy that human proximity and actions are not threats. Gently and gradually accustom the puppy to accept inappropriate human actions. Some exercises to help with that are listed below. If done properly, the puppy will quickly come to enjoy these exercises and look forward to being suddenly grabbed, restrained, and stared at.

Proximity – have many people approach the puppy and hand him a food treat.

Staring – start by holding a food treat by your eye and when the puppy looks up, give the treat. Slowly increase the time he must look into your eyes before he gets the treat. Then have visitors and strangers do the exercise.

Reaching down – repeatedly offer a food treat with one hand and slowly reach down with the other. After a few trials, make contact, first one scratch behind the ear, then two, then several, before each treat.

Grabbing – As the above exercise proceeds, gradually increase the speed with which you reach for him. Similarly, increase the vigor of the petting, patting, and scratching with each trial. The aim is for the puppy to associate a rapidly approaching hand with profuse praise and wonderful treats.



Hugging – Many children will go up to a strange dog and give it a hug. This is often considered unwanted restraint to the dog so we must teach puppies that being hugged is not a threat. Hug the puppy and then give a treat. Do it many times before letting a child do it.

Feeding time

It is important to teach your puppy that humans and food go together. Hang around with him when he is eating. Sit on the floor next to him and pet him and put your hands in his bowl. Hand feed him part of his meal so that he makes an association between your hand and receiving food, not having it taken away. Occasionally take the bowl away while he is eating and add a special treat. Walk up to the puppy while he is eating and drop in a special treat. Walk by the puppy while he is eating and “accidentally” bump into him. This work is very important to teach your puppy that he doesn’t have to guard his food.

Training

It’s never too early to take your dog to training classes. It’s another great opportunity for socialization, helps exercise your dog’s brain, and is fun! For more information about the MSPCA Dog Training classes go to www.mspca.org/dogtraining.

Congratulations and good luck with your new puppy! If you have any questions concerning his behavior or training, don’t hesitate to call us.