

Your puppy has reached adolescence. Whether you are observing your puppy's development change from just a few weeks of age, or you've introduced a young dog into your household that is many months old, congratulations you now have an emotionally driven and easily-offended adolescent. Adolescence in dogs can be a challenging time for you and your dog. Your dog is likely to become more emotional, more impulsive, and more opinionated. This article aims to shed some light on these developing traits and focuses on the importance of continuing socialization through adolescence and into adulthood.

Socialization is the process of exposing an animal to a wide range of stimuli and experiences at a level that the animal can handle in the moment. Many assume "socialization" means playing and getting along with other dogs. While we do hope to build positive communication between dogs in the early stages, socialization is not limited to this alone and has a much broader implication. The purpose of socialization is to expand the scope of situations where the animal is comfortable in the long term and it is most beneficial while an animal is young. In the early developmental stages, they are most open to accepting novel experiences and can encounter new situations with a more moldable perception of the world.

In dogs, there are two significant periods in their development where socialization is most beneficial. Between roughly 3 and 5 weeks, and again around 6 to 12 weeks of age. These weeks are most beneficial for effective socialization, but that doesn't mean we should stop there! Socialization should continue throughout your dog's life to maintain or further increase their comfort with the world. An adolescent's brain is still not fully formed and will continue to shape and develop in response to the dog's experiences. You can still make a valuable impact on your dog's well-being and tolerance of the world during adolescence and beyond.

What Socialization is Effective?

By effective socialization, we mean at the right level for your dog in a given scenario. Socialization is the exposure of your dog to a variety of environments that your dog experiences in a positive way. The adage "what doesn't kill me makes me stronger" does not apply here. It's not "they'll get over it" or "they're fine."

If you were able to survey your dog after exposing them to a scenario, how would they vote for their experience?

- (a) "That experience was great!"
- (b) "That experience was okay"
- (c) "That experience was uncomfortable"
- (d) "That experience was awful"

Your goal should be to aim for choice A and maybe some Bs. Mistakes will happen of course, but our goal is to prevent the C and D responses as best we can. And because we know Cs and Ds will occur, this is exactly why we want to establish a strong history of A and B responses; they are an investment in your dog's future perspective of the world. By doing this, your dog will be better able to tolerate the occasional C or D response. Science has shown that if your dog has a sense that a new experience can be fairly predictable and they have a sense of control, they will generally have an optimistic outlook. Meaning they will enter the experience with this assumption, that this scenario will result in a positive experience.

The right level of socialization for your dog is unique to your dog, and it should look fun and enjoyable. Your dog should remain observant, curious, want to engage, and ideally calm. Loose, wiggly, and relaxed body language with relaxed muscles, a lack of tension in the face or body, interest in the experience, and a desire to re-engage with the stimulus.

The wrong level of socialization is when you see signs of stress and discomfort, such as freezing, averting the eyes, showing the whites of the eyes, panting, backing up, head lower than the spine (also known as cowering), jumping on the dog's own person, showing teeth, showing gums, whining, growling, barking, panting. If you see one of these red flags, take a moment to check in with the dog. If the dog's attention is easily grabbed and they aren't scrambling towards or away from the experience, all is probably well. If you cannot get their attention, or they are acting in a more excitable manner, all might still be well but it's best to take a moment for your dog to regroup.

What does a well-socialized dog look like?

Our dogs are now living lives that have many demands, compared to days when we let them out in the morning and back in at night. In our modern homes, dogs are relatively sensory deprived compared to life on the street, or life on a farm, or as a working dog. Perhaps they are inside all day, crated or not, receive a couple of walks around the neighborhood, some time in a small dog park or your Arlington-sized yard. Then your college classmates invite you and your dog to West Virginia for the weekend. You will have the assumption that your fairly well-behaved dog at home will be a great tubing partner for a couple of days. Yet, to date, your dog hasn't been tubing, has barely stayed outside longer than 4 hours at a time, and hasn't been to a place called West Virginia. Knowing what you've read in this article, it wouldn't be surprising if your dog was a bit spooked and overwhelmed by all that trip had to offer. A long car ride, staying in a new location with people and a couple of dogs they've never met, are just a few of the new scenes your dog wasn't prepared for. In general, the idea of socialization is to increase the likelihood that your dog will stay observant and curious and decrease the likelihood that your dog is overwhelmed or triggered by these situations.

A well-socialized dog may sleep in the car, sniff the new people then want to go for a walk, wrestle a bit with a new dog, choose to go into a crate for the night, hike around during the day, watch a deer run by, and splash in the water. An undersocialized dog may drool in the car, bark at the people, pee in the cabin, be up all night pacing, break the collar running after the deer, and never make it to the water. These environments were too much for this dog.

Think of all the things you expect your dog to be familiar and comfortable with in your home life.

- Being alone
- Being at the vet
- Being with other dogs
- Being with people
- Riding in the car
- Being in a training class
- Being in new places
- Being on the street

- Seeing a bus drive by
- Being at the beach

This is not an exhaustive list.

For puppies, Fur-Get Me Not has Puppy Socials and Puppy Manners classes in which the dogs get exposure to people and dogs and other specifically placed experiences all while training with treats. Trainers are on hand to assist in making the school facility a great time for all, adjusting to increase the positive experiences of your puppy.

What about Adolescents?

Yes, Adolescents need socialization, too. The tricky part is that, like human adolescents, dog adolescents are also emotional and opinionated. Their brains are still developing and their actions are still governed more by their amygdala than their prefrontal cortex; the emotional brain is preferred over the thinking brain. Decisions are still made with their gut. By 6 months, almost any breed puppy becomes a bit more assertive than when they were younger. They begin to test you to seek answers. Can I walk this far away from you? Can I jump on this shelf?

Puppy Manners laid the foundation, now it's a great time to build their frustration tolerance. Like human adolescents, puppy adolescents push the envelope with you and try to settle the score on some things that they feel might not have gone so well in puppyhood. For example, if the same harness is presented in adolescence, they might act like "You know, what? I never liked this harness." All of a sudden their opinions are becoming voiced more clearly than before. Research has shown that they are full of the wrongs that were done to them as a puppy that they hadn't yet responded to.

Similarly, their play transforms into pushy behaviors and decreased self-regulation. They become more choosy about who they would like to interact with. Previous puppy friendships with dogs and humans should remain intact, but new ones won't be as easy to come by.

Because adolescent play has changed, in our classes and socials we like to separate puppies less than 6 months old from those that are older than 6 months. Adolescent Manners is a great place for your 6+ month old to get more socialization. For the Adolescent dogs, we limit the off-leash play to reduce the clash of introducing the opinionated with the intimidated. That does not mean that play is off the menu. Adolescent socialization needs to be more targeted and with fewer actors. Play is important and is best done with other dogs your dog already knows.

How Fur-Get Me Not can help

Chaperoned Playdates! At Fur-Get Me Not, you can register for **Chaperoned Playdates**. For example, if you and your neighbor have dogs that have played in the past, you can meet at the Fur-Get Me Not training facility and have a playdate. The Trainer Chaperone can point out good play versus play that should be interrupted.

If your extended family member just got a dog whom you will see frequently, you could register for a Chaperoned Playdate to introduce your dog to the new dog. New introductions are best begun on leash on a walk at a 15 ft distance. Keeping a close eye on the body language of both dogs. Most noticeable is energy level. If the dogs' energy level increases dramatically when near, then more time is needed to invest in this introduction. While the energy level could be a sign of a positive emotion, it still means slow down. If either dog is aroused, regardless of the upbeat nature, that arousal can quickly slip from one emotion to a high level of an opposite emotion. To reduce the likelihood of a bad experience, it is best to slow down the socialization process by increasing distance.

Our Adolescent Manners group class is a great place to make positive associations and practice socialization while reinforcing desired and socially adaptive behaviors for a strong bond between you and your dog. We also focus on meeting the needs of your adventurous teen through **enrichment activities** to expend mental energy, **build confidence**, and **problem-solving skills**.

Just like with puppies, there are so many things to expose them to. But the exposure is only going to be beneficial if the dog is having a good time. You can build up and maintain their tolerance to all sorts of experiences and environments through socialization activities and should do so throughout their lives. Adolescence is a valuable time to help your dog grow into a well-adjusted and confident adult dog. **As with humans, comfort and familiarity with the world help to reduce stress and anxiety**, creating an easier and more pleasant life experience for both you and your dog together.