

## What is Socialization?

Socialization is the process of exposing your puppy to a wide range of stimuli and experiences at a level that your puppy can handle in the moment, for the purpose of expanding the scope of situations where your puppy is comfortable.

Socialization is especially important early in a dog's life. Picture your puppy's experience as a pool of water and more water is added as a dog ages. Each experience the dog has is a drop of food coloring placed into the dog's pool of water. Prior to 12 weeks old, there isn't much water in the pool, so each drop of food coloring will color the pool water significantly. The depth of color for each drop of food coloring (i.e. positive experience) will begin to dissipate as the dog gets older.

By 3 years, the water is high enough that a drop of food coloring in the pool is unlikely to color the pool's water in any meaningful way. It takes many more consistent positive experiences to impact an older dog. Dogs who are isolated in their early months have a more difficult time navigating the world later in life. Socialization exercises, when done carefully, at the dog's comfort level, can contribute to your dog being able to deal with a wide variety of experiences with a greater chance of bouncing back from a novel or negative experience.

## Why Socialize?

Socialization aims to build friendliness towards and tolerance of different things that your puppy will experience throughout their life. Socialization is often thought of as your puppy having fun meeting lots of people or other dogs, but the scope should be much more. A strong socialization plan will include different environments, sights, smells, and sounds. It will include fun handling and alone time.

Without broad socialization early in a puppy's life, the puppy may grow up into a dog that is avoidant, fearful of, or even aggressive towards different stimuli. We can help dogs be well-adjusted to living in our human-centric world by making sure they have had a wealth of positive experiences with all sorts of things while they are young and continue this process throughout their lives to maintain their comfort with the world.

## Where and When to Start?

Because the earlier positive experiences have the most impact on developing a well-adjusted dog, these socialization steps should begin regardless of whether your puppy is fully vaccinated or not. If you wait to socialize until they complete their puppy vaccines (around 16-18 weeks), they will have missed out on this most meaningful time to be exposed to the world. While canine diseases are of concern for young puppies, the [American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior](#) (AVSAB) advises that socialization outside of the home can and should begin as early as 7 days after their first round of vaccinations. This is important because behavioral issues are the number one cause of death for

dogs under three years of age. Let's inoculate your puppy by setting them up for success in future life situations.

Our emotions greatly affect our willingness to take risks. If you wish to be more conservative while socializing your puppy before they are fully vaccinated, you could focus on socialization activities in the home, in locations where the risk of illness can be minimized, manage the environment to reduce risk (e.g. keeping your puppy on a mat and off the ground when outdoors), or participate in a structured program such as our Puppy Socials and Puppy Manners group class.

### **How to Do It**

During socialization, you consciously present experiences of the world for your dog at a level they enjoy or are curious about. An important piece of socialization is knowing how your puppy is feeling about the situation by reading their body language and knowing what steps to take based on what you see. With socialization, all exposures to new things should be positive and within the puppy's tolerance. If a puppy experiences something new in a way that is too much for them, you may do the opposite of socialization: create a sensitivity to that thing. This means that your puppy becomes more skeptical and aware of that stimulus, instead of more tolerant of it. If you don't know what your puppy is saying with their body language, it's very challenging to know if they are having a good time or a bad time.

For example, suppose you were trying to ensure your puppy was comfortable with a brush. If when stroked with the brush, the puppy licked their lips, yawned, shifted away, or pinned their ears back, would you notice? These are all likely signs of being uncomfortable and you may be sensitizing your puppy to the brush's presence. What you may accidentally teach is that the brush equals feeling uncomfortable, even if that brush experience is followed with play or treats; that uncomfortable feeling might outweigh how nice the fun stuff was. In this example, it may be better to take a step before using the brush, first ensuring the puppy can tolerate being stroked with your hand? Or can they tolerate the brush moving toward them without touching them? Stimuli or events can often be broken down into smaller pieces that your puppy can tolerate more easily. Taking these small steps while watching what your puppy is communicating will increase the chances of your puppy learning the world is a good place.

### **Continuing Socialization**

If your dog is beyond this 12 week early period, it's not game over! Socialization exercises like the example above can and should still be done to increase or maintain your dog's tolerance, though this would be done a bit differently if your dog already has an opinion about these stimuli. You can still pair those experiences with something your dog loves in order to build positive associations. Eventually the positive experiences can outweigh or reshape earlier negative experiences. Your dog won't

necessarily forget how they once felt but the chances of a future similar experience being tolerated increases.

### **How Fur-Get Me Not Can Help!**

As your dog has many positive experiences with a wide variety of different things to be found in the world, your puppy or dog can build a general response to new things of “That’s kind of odd, but odd things are interesting and fun. Sometimes they predict good things!”

Our Puppy Manners group class and Puppy Social are great ways to complement the socialization that you do at home. Simply coming to the building where there is a group of people and other dogs sets up many opportunities. In class, in addition to basic manners and behaviors, we teach you about body language and how to expose your puppy to something new in a way that is fun and enjoyable. Your puppy will meet new people, new sounds, new smells, new sights, and new puppies. Our goal is to have a positive experience with everything your dog encounters in class so that your puppy builds those positive associations with the world and the unexpected.

In Puppy Socials, these trainer-led sessions allow your puppy to play with other puppies in a safe environment where both you and your puppy can learn about play and body language while your puppy makes positive associations with new puppies that may look, smell, and move differently than other puppies they may have met before.

For a thorough and in-depth explanation of all the ins and outs of socialization, check out the book “Puppy Socialization: What It Is and How to Do It” by Marge Rogers and Eileen Anderson.

If your dog already has opinions that you are not sure how you can change, [register for a phone consult](#) with one of our trainers to discuss how you can approach this challenge. In addition to being able to offer private training customized to your needs, our behavior classes such as Confidence Building, People Reactive, and Dog Reactive focus on building positive associations with experiences where your dog may not currently be comfortable. We also focus on practical day to day management strategies to help minimize your dog’s discomfort.