

Socialization

is *gradual, positive* exposure to as many different people, animals, sights, sounds, and smells as possible.

Why Is It Important?

A well-socialized dog is a better companion! It helps them learn appropriate behavior and social skills.



These dogs will also have better coping skills enabling them to enjoy a wide range of activities with their family and other trusted people.

When Does It Happen?

Socialization occurs throughout a dog's lifetime, but puppies are most sensitive during the socialization phase. This takes place at 3–12 weeks of age, with peak sensitivity at 6–8 weeks. If socialization opportunities are missed or restricted, dogs are at increased risk for fear responses to people, places, or objects; aggression; and learning problems.



How Do I Socialize My Puppy?

Gradually expose the puppy to a variety of environmental stimuli in a controlled way. Minimize any fearful experiences and maximize positive experiences. Let the puppy approach and retreat from any new object or person in his or her own time; do not force them. Introduce new things one or two at a time so the puppy is not overwhelmed by the experience.



DID YOU KNOW?

Puppies also go through a **fear period** at 8–10 weeks of age when they are extremely sensitive to bad experiences.

HANDLE WITH CARE!

A single scary event can have lasting effects, and puppies can retain a specific fear (e.g., of people, dogs, objects, sounds) for their entire life.

Socialization requires exposure to many different stimuli, including:

- **PEOPLE** of different ages, races, and sexes wearing different types of clothing such as hats or winter coats.
- **DOGS** of different ages and breeds that are well socialized themselves.
- **OTHER ANIMALS** such as cats, horses, birds, and rabbits.
- **Things that move** such as **BIKES, SKATEBOARDS, AND WHEELCHAIRS.**
- **Introduction to CRATE TRAINING, RIDING IN A CAR.**
- **URBAN AND RURAL ENVIRONMENTS** that have different sounds, smells, and sights.
- **A RANGE OF SOUNDS** including music, sirens, vacuum cleaners, and other everyday noises.

It is important to support any fear with treats and patience. Signs of fear include trembling, hiding, running away, excessive barking or whining, aggression such as snapping or growling, or not moving (freezing). Manage group play and interactions with other dogs to minimize the risk of developing “bad” behaviors such as bullying and resource guarding.



PRACTICAL TIP



Adult dogs need socialization too!

It is important to maintain social experience and skills. Dogs that are well socialized at 3 months of age will become fearful if you do not reinforce their experiences and expose them to new ones.

Providing breeding animals with positive socialization experiences throughout their lives can give them a good foundation for success if they are placed in a new home.

This Animal Care Aid is part of a series developed to provide information about behavioral development in dogs. Refer to the other topics in the series for more information on maternal stress and the early rearing environment.

Questions? Email us at CenterforAnimalWelfare@usda.gov

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