

Puppy Socialization

What is socialization and why is it important?

Socialization is the process through which dogs learn what is safe and unsafe in the world around them. Puppies experience this critical socialization period from 3-16 weeks of age. It is during this time that it is important for puppies to be positively introduced to varying sights, sounds, surfaces, and people. Dogs who are well-socialized grow up more confident and resilient than their counterparts. It is important to intentionally socialize your dog, following the Socialization Steps below.



What is NOT socialization?

Socialization is NOT just exposure. Simply exposing your puppy to different people, places and things is not enough, and can lead to fear issues down the road. Socialization is *instead* about thoughtful introduction, going at your puppy's pace, and always creating a positive association for your dog. If your puppy is past the critical socialization window, you can still follow these Socialization Steps to help your dog learn how to trust the world around them.

Socialization Steps

Step 1. Create a list of Socialization Tasks.

Your puppy won't be able to experience *everything* in the human world, but you can prioritize the things you'd like them to enjoy as an adult. The more variety in your list, the better! Remember that variety teaches your dog to appreciate a changing environment, which helps prevent fear of novelty.

Step 2. Keep it Positive!

Make the experience fun by using yummy treats to help your puppy to associate these new experiences (including meeting new people) with awesome snacks! Play also helps keep introductions happy and positive. If your puppy is disinterested in treats they would normally enjoy, it could be a sign that your puppy is stressed and should be given a break.

Step 3. Go at your puppy's pace.

The goal is NOT to rush your dog! Allow your dog to go at their own pace so that they feel comfortable around different things. Learn about dog body language, so you can help prevent pushing your dog too far too fast. When in doubt - add some distance between your puppy and the new item. Only keep your dog in the interaction if they are having a good time. If your dog becomes distressed, call it quits for the day.

Step 4. Make Socialization short and sweet.

Keep socialization experiences brief. Avoid overstimulating or draining your puppy during these introductions. Spend 10-30 minutes at a time working on a task, and then give your puppy a break. End on a positive note to keep your dog looking forward to the next experience.

Training Tip: When in doubt, follow the Rule of 7, which gives you a goal of positively introducing your puppy to 7 of the following: different types of people (ex: heights, ages, genders, garments etc.), environments or locations (ex: parks, stores, river, stairs, etc.), surfaces (ex: gravel, grass, carpet, linoleum, etc), and sounds (trains, cars, babies, music, etc).

Sample Socialization Checklist

Use this sample checklist to get started on your Socialization Tasks. The examples shown are suggestions. Add more tasks in the blank spaces, according to your goals for your puppy. Use the Response Ratings below to record your puppy’s reaction to the experience. After you finish this list, create a new one on a blank sheet of paper. It’s a good idea to repeat exposure to each item, especially if your puppy was *at all* hesitant. Keep introducing new experiences until your puppy reaches adolescence. The more positive experiences, the better!

- 1 - Puppy was excited or enthusiastic (i.e. relaxed body, squinty eyes, moving towards)
- 2 - Puppy was neutral or unsure
- 3 - Puppy was scared or stressed (i.e. refused food, tried to escape, or became defensive)

Date	Category	Experience	Response rating
	Surface	Walked across a slatted bridge	
	Person	Met a man with a long beard and big hat	
	Place	Visited a hotel lobby	
	Sound	Heard an electric drill	