

How Does a Puppy Need to Be Socialized?

Socialization is a big project. **It requires exposure to the types of people, animals, places, sounds and experiences that you expect your dog to be comfortable in later in life.** Depending on the lifestyle you have planned for your dog, this might include the sight and sound of trains, garbage trucks, schoolyards of screaming children, crowds, cats, livestock or crying infants. While it's impossible to expose a young puppy to absolutely everything they will ever encounter in life, the more bases that you cover during the peak socialization period of 3 to 12 weeks, the more likely the puppy will be able to generalize from his prior experiences and find something reassuringly familiar in a new situation. **For any pet dog, it's essential to get him/her used to the common types of people, dogs, sights, sounds and physical handling and grooming that will be a sure part of their daily life.**

Do I Need to Do Anything Special When I Socialize My Puppy?

Yes! You need to make sure that the situation is not overwhelming for them, and that they become more comfortable—not more worried—each time you expose them to something. For instance, maybe you've planned a puppy party where a group of people will gather to help you socialize your puppy right at home. But some puppies can be overwhelmed by meeting a bunch of strangers all at once. Even though your intentions are good, if your puppy is cowering in the corner at his/her own party, then they are not learning anything good about strangers! The rule of thumb with puppy socialization is to keep a close eye on your puppy's reaction to whatever you expose them to so that you can tone things down if your pup seems at all frightened. **Always follow up a socialization experience with praise, petting, a fun game or a special treat.**

What If My Puppy Seems Frightened During Socialization?

Even though 3 to 12 weeks old is a time when puppies are most comfortable with new experiences, they might sometimes find a new experience frightening. **Whenever this happens, it's important to introduce your puppy to the scary situation much more gradually, and to make a big effort to do something your puppy loves during the situation or right afterwards.** For example, if your puppy seems to be frightened while sitting on your lap in a schoolyard full of children, then sit further away from the action and offer your pup a delicious treat each time a scary noise or movement happens. Another solution is to go to a much quieter park where only a few children are playing, use praise and treats to help convince him/her it's a great place to be, and then over days or even weeks of your socialization sessions, gradually approach a schoolyard again once they have started to like the sights and sounds of active children.

Puppy Classes

One great way to help socialize a puppy is to attend puppy kindergarten classes. These are classes designed especially for puppy training and early socialization. In a typical puppy class, off-leash play and play-fighting helps socialize puppies with each other, teaches them to be gentle with their mouthing and biting, and gets them used to being handled by a variety of people. Some classes even include exposure to odd sights and sounds using props, CDs of sounds, and theatrics with costumes to accustom the puppies to a wide range of life experiences. Puppy classes also teach some basic obedience skills, so on top of the socialization component, you'll learn how to ask your pup to comply with your requests and behave according to your expectations.

Vaccinations and Disease Risk During Early Socialization

Most young puppies aren't fully protected against the diseases we vaccinated them for until they've had all of their puppy shots. This is mainly because the antibodies they get from their mother can interfere with the ability of the vaccine to have its full effect. **Even though puppies' immune systems are still developing during their early months, if we wait until a puppy has all of his/her shots before socializing, we miss our chance to do it.** They'll simply be too old.