

Puppy Socialization (The Critical Early Weeks)

The socialization period (the puppy pre-school period) is a critical period of development whereby a dog learns to communicate and relate to other dogs, humans, and the environment around them. It is the most influential learning period of a dog's life, forming the foundation for all future learning. Socialization can be divided into primary socialization (3-5 weeks of age) and secondary socialization (6-12 weeks of age). Lack of exposure and positive experiences during this time will prevent the puppy from reaching its full potential. Lack of experience during the socialization period is just as detrimental as a bad experience. Many adult behavior problems can be prevented or reduced through appropriate and thorough socialization. Foundation training should begin during the socialization period at 8 weeks of age, when a puppy's brain has matured enough learning ability.

A FEAR PERIOD has been documented to occur between 8-10 weeks of age. Traumatic experiences during this sensitive period to fearful stimuli may be generalized and produce lifelong aversion responses.

Between 12 and 16 weeks of age, puppies become progressively more reluctant to approach novelty and unfamiliar people without apprehension and fear responses. After 16 weeks of age, this *golden* period for social and emotional development comes to an end, making future adaptation to their changing world more difficult.

The American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior's position statement on socialization:

During this time puppies should be exposed to as many new people, animals, stimuli and environments as can be achieved safely and without causing over-stimulation manifested as excessive fear, withdrawal or avoidance behavior.

Consider making a socialization checklist with as many novelties that your puppy should be and has been exposed to. Use your imagination. Take opportunities whenever possible and practical.

Catagories include:

Environments – vet clinic, stores, hotel, office, campground, sport events, playgrounds

Animals – dogs, cats, horses, farm animals, small pets, birds, etc

People – crowds, various age, sex, ethnicity, uniform, movement, appearance, smells

Surfaces – vary texture, temperature, wetness, gravel, metal grates, astro turf, etc

Sounds – weather, traffic, music, shouting kids, fireworks, doorbell, small appliances

Novelty items – elevator, wheelchair, lawn mower, sprinkler, bicycle, statues, bridges, boat, motorcycle, baby stroller, umbrella, trash can, shower, broom, etc..

This list has endless possibilities.

Socialization is actually a lifelong process. Repeated exposure is important because dogs do not generalize well. Learning is situational and context specific. So although your puppy may be comfortable meeting new people at the pet store, if he has never met a new person while walking at the park or in your yard, this is different. Therefore, repeated exposure to subtle variations of the same theme is necessary.

Socialization is not just about exposure, rather, it is about making exposure fun and positive. Let the puppy acclimate to a new environment by staying at a “safe” distance when first arriving. Let the puppy first observe crowds from this distance. Assume that the puppy could be potentially afraid of any new environment and be proactive. Do not wait for the puppy to show signs of fear first.

Most of the above text has been taken directly or paraphrased from the booklet entitled Puppy Start Right: Foundation Training for the Companion Dog by Kenneth M. Martin, DVM Veterinary Behavior Consultations, LLC New Orleans, LA, 2009. www.veterinarybehavior.com

Reference to the FEAR PERIOD is from a cited reference:

Fox MW. 1966. Neuro-behavioral ontogeny: A synthesis of ethological and neurophysiological concepts. *Brain Res*, 2:3-20.