

THE SOCIAL SCENE

Little puppies don't come into our world with ready knowledge about humans or the world in which we live. They need to learn all about us- about car rides, vacuums, weaving bicycles and more. If they don't have a chance to learn about the people, animals and things in their environment, they may grow up to be fearful, anxious, antisocial adults. This situation can usually be prevented with early socialization and exposure to as many people, animals, sights, sounds and places as possible. If you are considering getting a new puppy, it is best to obtain it at approximately seven weeks old. Before this time, a puppy needs to be socialized to its mother and littermates. From seven weeks on, it is critical that puppies socialize with humans.

Socialization- Making Friends

Socialization is the process of developing relationships with other living beings in your environment. The first few months of your puppy's life are the most critical for its development. If this time passes without the young pup making necessary social contacts, irreparable damage may result, leading to fear, timidity, or aggression. Since the most sensitive period for puppy socialization occurs during the first 12 weeks of age, you should begin the socialization process as soon as you get your new puppy (and then continue into adulthood).

Start with simple, quiet, one-person introductions and gradually include more people in noisier situations. Invite friends, relatives and their pets to come to your home to meet, greet and play with your puppy. As soon as your veterinarian says your puppy is adequately vaccinated, take it on as many walks and outings as possible. Initially avoid situations that might be high risk for disease, such as neighborhood parks or areas with stray dogs. To make the new introductions special, give a small biscuit to your puppy whenever it meets someone. As soon as your puppy can sit on command, have it sit when it meets new people, letting each new friend give the reward. This teaches your puppy to greet properly, rather than lunging or jumping up on visitors and passersby.

Networking

It is important that your puppy meets and receives treats from a wide variety of people of all ages and appearances. A puppy that grows up in a restricted social group (e.g. all adults or all females) may show fear and aggression when later exposed to people who appear or act differently (e.g. children, men with beards). Even if there are no children living at home, it is likely your puppy will encounter them sometime. Therefore, every effort should be made to see that your young pup has plenty of opportunities to play with and learn about children. Some pups seem to consider kids to be a completely different species since they walk, act and talk much differently than adults. If you don't provide your puppy with adequate, positive interaction with children during its early months it may never feel comfortable around them.

Another excellent way to promote early socialization is to take your puppy to training classes. The new concept in training is to start puppies young, before they pick up bad habits and when learning is rapid. Many communities now have puppy training and socialization classes where puppies can be admitted as early as their third month. These classes not only help the pups get off to a great start with training, but they also offer a wonderful opportunity for important social exercise with other puppies and people. Ask your veterinarian about classes available in your area.

Punishment during the early development stages can negatively influence the puppy's relationship with people. Avoid training methods that involve physical discipline like swatting your pup, thumping it on the nose, and rubbing its face in the mess. These methods can teach your dog to fear the human hand or to become fear biter. In general, during the early months of your puppy's life, avoid any interactions with people who might make it anxious.

Habituation – hello world!

Habituation is a fancy term that involves getting used to a varied environment. As your puppy matures, new sounds and situations can lead to fear and anxiety. Begin the habituation process at early stage. Frequently expose the pup to different sights, sounds, odors, and situations.

For example, repeated, short car rides can minimize the anxiety associated with traveling, provided nothing unpleasant occurs during the ride. Also expose your puppy to stimuli such as the sound of traffic, sirens, airplanes, water, elevators, or alarm clocks. If your puppy seems to be exceptionally cautious when first introduced to new situations or stimuli, start with mild exposure and give food rewards for nonfearful responses. Never give the reward while the pet is exhibiting fearful behavior – this only rewards the very response you are trying to discourage. Your puppy then can be gradually “built up” to more intense exposure. Tape recordings of a variety of environmental sounds are available if it's difficult to expose your puppy to sufficient stimuli in your own neighborhood.

Properly socializing and shaping your puppy's temperament requires an investment in time. You will find that your efforts are worthwhile when you become the proud parent of a social, friendly dog.

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