

Everyone has heard that socialization is very important for dogs, but not everyone may know when and how it takes place! When a puppy is developing, one of their developmental stages is called the socialization period. This period is from 3-12 weeks of age and this is when the puppy is most accepting of new things. Puppies should be rather fearless at this stage and willing to investigate their environment. They are also learning how to form attachments with humans and other dogs, read body language, and build trust. Once the puppy hits 12 weeks of age, this window of socialization begins to close. So, by the time the puppies 16 weeks of age, they are starting to become more cautious. This means that attachment to people and other dogs, and fearlessly investigating new things, slows down dramatically.

It's possible to socialize an older dog, but you may never get the same results as if the process had been started earlier and generally it will take longer. The ideal response from your dog is a quick recovery. This means that the dog may startle for a second initially but can quickly and confidently recover when presented with a new stimulus.

You may be thinking, "Wait, I didn't even get my dog until they were 8-weeks old!" There is a great benefit to puppies staying with their mom and littermates until 8 weeks of age, or even longer. They're learning communication skills and bite inhibition. For optimal behavioral development, it would be great if they were spending those 8 weeks in an enriched environment (full of positive, social interactions with a variety of people, places, and things). However, you may or may not know your puppy's history prior to you obtaining them, so the best you can do at that point is to get to work socializing.

Socialization should always be positive and never overwhelming to the dog (young or old). You should also take safety precautions to make sure the environment is physically, as well as mentally, safe. For instance, if your puppy is not fully vaccinated yet, you'll want to make sure interactions with other dogs occur with vaccinated, healthy pets. An example of a mentally safe environment is one in which the puppy is unlikely to get scared suddenly, which could actually sensitize them to the stimulus. For example, you're sitting outside a coffee shop with your young puppy and some skateboarders go roaring right past and really scare your puppy. That could leave a negative, lasting impression. Try to always make sure that you are aware of the surroundings and can position yourself so that your puppy doesn't get scared. Taking treats with you is a good idea so he can associate the new things with something positive. Kids on skateboards mean yummy treats are coming!



When socializing with people, be aware of your dog's body language and never pressure them in a situation. Let your puppy warm up to people, places, animals, and things at their own pace. Remember, your puppy is a baby and humans can look like scary, giants from their point of view. The goal is to let your puppy encounter as many different people, animals, places, and things as possible, while also keeping it safe and positive. If you have a young dog, 100 new things in the first 100 days of life (approx. 3-1/2 months old) is a great goal. Included is a checklist to give you some ideas on how to socialize your pet. This list isn't all-encompassing, but it should start you on the right path.

Stimuli to help socialize your puppy or dog:

- Men, of all races and ages
- Women, of all races and ages
- Children of differing heights, ages, and activity levels
- Someone wearing a hat
- Someone wearing sunglasses (dogs are used to being able to read a person's eyes for clues and sunglasses look like big, dilated pupils)
- Someone with a strong scent (perfume, cologne, smoke, etc.)
- Someone carrying an umbrella or other object (anything that changes the typical silhouette could be scary)
- Someone with a different gait
- Someone using a walker/cane/wheelchair/electric scooter
- Cars, trucks, bicycles, skateboards, rollerblades, and any other wheeled devices
- Dogs of all different breeds (use only friendly, safe dogs – puppies & adults)
- Cats (dog-friendly, of course)
- Other animals
- Inanimate objects – trash bags, tin foil, garbage cans, yard art, Christmas trees, boxes
- Weather conditions (if possible) – rain, snow, wind
- Flooring surfaces – tile, hardwood, laminate, carpet, rocks, dirt, grass, shiny flooring, slick flooring
- Spaces – big open spaces, small spaces (usually this happens indoors when a dog is nervous about walking through a small area or hugs the wall in an open space)
- Places – the vet, the groomer, the boarding facility, and anywhere else they'll have to go (Take the puppy to these places to meet the people and have a treat, many times if possible, before you have to leave them there or have something less-than-pleasant happen.)
- Objects – touch the puppy with all sorts of random objects like nail clippers, brushes, bandanas, coats, collars.
Many dogs are nervous when someone tries to touch them with something in their hand