

Dog Socialization

Both puppies and adult dogs need to be properly socialized to fit into human lives well. By socialization, we usually mean teaching the dog that new things can be fun. This process can be done correctly or incorrectly. The goal is to have the dog be able to experience new and different things (people with hats or beards, uneven or slippery surfaces, loud noises, etc.) and have a positive emotional response.

In order for this to happen, we need to remember a few things. The socialization period for puppies is earlier than many people realize. Between three weeks and three months is the time when puppies will experience new things in the environment and be able to recover quickly from mild anxiety. After this time frame, the default response to something different is fear, as this would protect them in the wild. This fear can lead to stress and eventually behavior issues if not properly addressed.

Most veterinarians, myself included, have always recommended waiting to socialize puppies until after they have had all their vaccines. This timing will cause some puppies to be more fearful potentially. We need to start taking our puppies out and about, so long as the environment is safe. Take the dog with you to your friend's house or a training area that you know is safe. Bring the puppy to the veterinary office for what we call happy visits-- they come, get petted and given treats, see lots of new people and only good things happen. If the only time your puppy comes to the veterinarian is to have things done, sometimes that does not give the best impression.

At home, you want to expose the puppy to common things that might happen and pair them with positive things (like treats or toys). For instance, start by touching the puppy's toes or ears and then giving a treat. He will start to learn that every time someone touches my foot, I get something good. This sets the puppy up well for future nail trims. This process can be done with all kinds of procedures-- ear cleaning, tooth brushing, injections, etc.

Adult dogs who have not been properly exposed to unique and different things can still be taught to accept new things, it just may take longer since we are past the ideal time frame. There are many different ways to change how a dog responds to something or someone. The best way to train new responses is to use positive reinforcement. This is a method of training in which the dog is given something he really enjoys (treats, toys, petting for examples) as a reward for an appropriate behavior. When training, one needs to evaluate where you are, where you want to be and develop a step-wise plan to reach the end goal of the desired behavior. This is often best achieved with the help of an experienced trainer.