



Socialization: The Most Important Time of Your Puppy's Life!

From the age of 3-16 is a “sensitive” period for **socialization** for puppies. A sensitive period means this is a time when the experiences they have will have lasting effects on the personality for the rest of their life. From the ages of 12-16 weeks this window begins to close rapidly!

Sensitive periods are extremely important; the things your puppy learns to accept in this time period will be considered “safe” and will be well tolerated for the rest of their life. Things that your puppy is not properly exposed to during this period are more likely to cause them trouble in the future. A puppy that lacks proper socialization can have lots of problems as an adult; these dogs can become extremely fearful and may run away from, bark at or even become aggressive in the presence of triggers such as men, children, crowds or loud noises!

Most of us bring our puppy's home around 8-9 weeks of age, by this time half of your puppy's window for socialization is already gone! When you bring your puppy home proper socialization should be a major priority. Behaviors can be learned at any time, but once the socialization window is closed you can never get it back.

How Do I Do It?

So, you know how long you have, and how important it is, so how exactly do you do it properly? To properly socialize a puppy you must do two things:

- Exposure your puppy to as MANY different stimuli as possible before the age of 16 weeks. Including: handling, people, places, sounds, objects and scents.
- Make sure that these exposures are done **POSITIVELY!** The puppy must be having a **GOOD** time while exploring these new situations.

Making sure the puppy is having a good experience is absolutely critical. Unfortunately for us the age of 8-16 weeks is also the first **fear imprint** period! This means that for the first time in their young lives our puppies are more likely to be afraid of “scary” things. Traumatic experiences at this age can have a lasting impression! So for owners, this means the challenge becomes: making sure your puppy is being exposed to a wide variety of stimuli and situations while also preventing them from having a negative, traumatic experience!

Follow these guidelines for socialization:

- Use a list as a guideline to help you expose your puppy to all the right things!
- Load yourself with treats and feed your puppy, or have others feed, while he is being socialized
- Socialize without overwhelming your puppy, avoid intense situations. For example, introduce your puppy to one child first, not a busy playground! Expose them to a single loud noise, not an entire firework display!
- Watch your puppy closely to make sure he is having a good time!

If your puppy seems nervous:

- Back further away from the stimulus that is causing fear. See if your puppy is able to relax and observe at a further distance
- Try picking your puppy up to provide support. Don't panic as your puppy will pick up on this! Hold your puppy gently but firmly and speak in a soft, soothing voice talking slowly: "goooooood booooooy" while slowly stroking his body or gently scratching his ears. Avoid speaking fast and patting rapidly as this will cause more anxiety.
- Make adjustments to the environment to make it less intense. If you are introducing your puppy to a group of people and he seems overwhelmed step away and have him meet one person at a time.

Finally, make sure you know what your puppy looks like when he is having a good time, and what he looks like when he is afraid! Some signs are obvious but others are more subtle. Familiarize yourself with the lists below so you are able to step in and help your puppy out if he is having a bad time!

Signs Your Puppy is Having Fun:

- Loose, wiggly body – "Jello puppy"
- Wagging the tail so much that the hind end is waving back and forth
- Open, relaxed, panting mouth
- Readily eating treats
- Eagerly moving forward towards the stimulus
- Ears in a relaxed position
- Tail wagging in a circle or loosely back and forth (not raised high or tucked low)

Signs Your Puppy is NOT Having Fun:

- Stiff body, no wiggle or bounce
- Ears pricked far forward or pulled back
- Tail held high over the back or tucked between the legs
- Tail wagging high and slowly or wagging low and fast
- Mouth closed
- Hiding or cowering behind owner
- Not willing to approach stimulus, or approaching with a long stretch (stretching out/reaching with back legs)
- Not willing to eat
- Yawing, licking-lips, looking away, shaking off as if wet or lifting a paw