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Socialising your Puppy

What is socialisation?

Socialisation involves meeting and having pleasant encounters with many adults, children, dogs (puppies and adults), and other animals. Puppies also need to get used to a wide range of events, environments and situations.

Friendly or frightened?

Take on a puppy and you take on the responsibility for it's future. A puppy's first year is very important. Puppies that are well socialised grow up to be friendly and happy with people and other animals, and make very successful pets. Dogs that were taken out regularly as puppies can take different situations in their stride and enjoy going anywhere with their owners. Dogs that like people can be taken anywhere and live life to the full. Undersocialised puppies grow into adult dogs that bite because they are afraid. Dogs that bite don't have a bright future. Dogs that haven't got used to lots of places and events don't enjoy being taken out.

The sooner the better

During the early weeks, a puppy will approach anything or anybody willingly and without fear. By the time it reaches about 12 weeks of age, any new encounter will be approached with caution and trepidation. Therefore, it is vital that a puppy meets a wide variety of people, situations and other animals between 3 and 12 weeks of age. Puppies usually go to new homes from the age of about 6-8 weeks. This means you should make a real effort to socialise your new puppy well during your first few months together. Socialisation after this time is also necessary to build on the foundation or to make up for lost time, particularly if your puppy was not socialised adequately in the litter or was unwell. If you continue to make an effort until the puppy is at least one year old, you will end up with an friendly adult dog that can be taken anywhere.

It's easy!

Take your puppy out and about as much as possible as soon as he has settled in, taking care not to overwhelm him and to keep him safe from infectious diseases (see later). Begin slowly at first, gradually increasing the number of encounters and the time spent socialising as your puppy becomes older and more able to cope.

Since it is particularly necessary for pet dogs to enjoy the company of humans, it is important that he meets a lot of them, especially children of all ages. Take your puppy to them, and invite them round to your house. It's easy really, but you do make the effort to get on with it while your puppy is still young.

'Think puppy'

All encounters should be enjoyable. Keep your puppy happy by giving strangers small tasty tit-bits to feed, or by passing them a favourite toy so they can play together. Watch your puppy constantly for signs that he is becoming anxious or overwhelmed, and, if so, remove him from the situation or give him more space and freedom to approach in his own time. Young puppies are inexperienced and will get themselves into trouble easily. Think ahead and try to prevent unpleasant events. Arrange for all encounters to be successful and rewarding. Remember that young puppies tire easily, so keep encounters short with enough time in between for resting.

Areas to work on

Adults and children

Meeting adults and children is the most important item on your socialisation programme. The more humans your puppy meets and plays with, the more friendly and sociable he will become. All ages and temperaments of adults and children need to be encountered. This is not usually too difficult, but you will need to make the effort to do so.

Ensure your puppy has happy encounters with veterinary surgery staff (who, one day, may need to handle your dog in an emergency) and delivery people who may, otherwise, be seen as a threat



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Other dogs and puppies

Finding a good class is essential as a bad one can do more harm than good (your veterinary surgeon may be able to recommend one). Ask to watch another class in progress before you take your puppy along. If the sessions are well controlled and planned, run only for young puppies rather than for older dogs as well, the class size is small (up to 10), and the puppies and their owners look as though they are enjoying it and learning too, sign up.

Your puppy should be carefully introduced to adult dogs as well as other puppies. Ensure these dogs are 'safe' around puppies as a bad experience is worse than none at all.

Protect your puppy from the exuberant play of a bigger dog, especially if your puppy is shy. Crouch down to provide your puppy with a "safe haven" and do not allow an older dog or puppy to frighten him.

Since your puppy will not be protected from the major diseases until after his vaccinations have taken effect, special care should be taken to ensure that the dogs and puppies encountered are fully vaccinated and healthy (see later).

Cats, livestock, horses

Puppies should meet a variety of other animals, but should be kept under control to prevent them learning to enjoy chasing.

Environments

Puppies will need to encounter a variety of different environments and situations. This will provide an opportunity to become familiar with a wide range of different scents, sights and sounds. Gradually accustom your puppy to car travel, traffic, crowds, the countryside and towns. Remember to 'think puppy'. Imagine how it feels to be that small, vulnerable and inexperienced and try to make sure the puppy is enjoying the experience and not feeling overwhelmed.

Vaccination v Socialisation

Young animals are very susceptible to disease before their immune systems have had a chance to become effective. Very young puppies acquire some immunity from their mothers which protects them during the early weeks. This fades over time and needs to be replaced by immunity stimulated by vaccinations. Some vaccines (e.g. Nobivac) allow the vaccination course to begin at the age of six weeks allowing earlier socialisation than was once possible. Since keeping a puppy isolated until it has developed full immunity can ruin its future character, a compromise must be reached between the need to protect against disease, and the need to ensure good mental health. As most of the socialisation will be with humans rather than other dogs, such a compromise is feasible and, if the following guidelines are adhered to, it is possible to socialise your puppy and avoid the risk of infection.

Until your puppy is fully protected by vaccination it should:

- not be allowed to mix with dogs of unknown vaccination status.
- not be taken to parks or walked in other areas which other dogs have fouled
- be taken out and about often in 'non-doggy' areas, carrying if necessary to avoid contact with other dogs or soiled areas

Worms and children

Ask your veterinary surgeon for an effective worming medication (e.g. Panacur) or continue with the programme that was already started at the place from which your puppy was obtained. Do not allow your puppy to lick children's faces, particularly their mouths, encourage children to wash their hands after playing with your puppy, and pick up and dispose of faeces regularly.

Giving your puppy an education

As well as socialising and training, it is essential that you teach your puppy how to behave. If you socialise your puppy well, he should be friendly and eager to meet people and other animals. Control some of the exuberance that comes with this and you will have found the perfect balance of friendliness and politeness. Preventing bad behaviour, ignoring or distracting unwanted actions and rewarding and praising good behaviour is the key to good manners.

Ignore unwanted actions and they will occur less often. Reward good behaviour and it will happen more often.