

The ABCs of Puppy Socialization

How to help your puppy grow into a people-friendly dog.

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Coming up with people and places for socialization opportunities can require creativity, but the how is simple. Use treats and a lot of praise, touch, and gentle play to convince your puppy that the new sight, smell, person, or situation is fun. End each introduction on a positive note, perhaps with a treat, affection, or short play session with a favorite toy.

Should We Take a Class?

Puppy socialization classes are a wonderful place for your puppy to learn about other dogs. Your puppy will learn to share and interact with other owners and pets on his own, at his own pace. Most of the time, you will sit back and watch, refraining from forcing your pup to interact and instead leaving the when, how, and how much up to your puppy.

Consult your veterinarian about the best time to start your puppy in socialization classes. The standard recommendation is to wait to start classes until his vaccinations are complete, but Tripp believes that's an outdated idea. "It is certainly true that you must separate your puppy from sick and aggressive dogs," he says. "However, delaying socialization until vaccines are finished at four months squanders this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity." The best policy is to combine a vaccine and socialization program. Your veterinarian is the best person to help you construct a program that works for your individual puppy.

To find a good puppy class, ask for recommendations from dog-owning friends and animal professionals, such as your groomer or veterinarian. You can also call the places that offer puppy socialization classes and ask for references from people who have used their services.

If you don't have access to puppy classes, take stock of your dog-owning friends, and invite them and their fully vaccinated, adult dogs to your home.

Keep It Up

By exposing your puppy gradually and positively to new sights, sounds, and experiences, you encourage further learning. As Wright explains with co-author Judi Wright Lashnits in "Ain't Misbehavin': The Groundbreaking Program for Happy, Well-Behaved Pets and Their People" (Rodale, 2001, \$18.95), Socialization does not stop at a certain age. It is a continual process ... You must continually exercise and socialize a dog throughout their lifetime. Puppy socialization plants the seeds of confidence and good behavior; ongoing socialization lets both you and your dog reap the rewards.