

The ABCs of Puppy Socialization

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

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Ten years ago, Jessie, a Wirehaired Dachshund, was the dominant puppy in her litter. "When I brought her home, she tried to boss me around," says owner Betty Ruby of Ohio. "She was running my life."

But help existed to reverse Jessie's dominance before it became ingrained. "My veterinarian recommended taking Jessie to a puppy socialization class, which was invaluable," Ruby says. "That class taught Jessie and me boundaries. It taught Jessie how to be a member of my family. She is my constant companion."

When Should I Socialize My Puppy?

As it was for Jessie, the key to successful socialization is in the timing. According to Rolan Tripp, DVM, founder of the Animal Behavior Network, socialization is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. The puppy's brain is at the developmental stage; he is primed to learn to accept new experiences. This occurs between the ages of 4 to 12 weeks.

In fact, this period is often referred to as the socialization period (although some experts assert it begins later, at 7 weeks). The general consensus among experts in canine development is that dogs are most receptive to learning about how to deal with new environments, people, and other animals until they are approximately 12 to 14 weeks old. Learning continues, of course, but drives to establish independence and ranking can inhibit your puppy's openness to new things after this age.

This socialization window means that dogs that aren't socialized properly during the first three months of their lives may have severely undeveloped social skills. According to John Wright, Ph.D., certified animal behaviorist and a professor of psychology at Mercer University in Macon, Ga., it is easier for the puppy to learn about and accept something novel during the socialization period than after the socialization period has ended. Primary socialization is anything that the puppy is introduced to up until he is 12 weeks of age. After that time period, anything that is introduced is secondary socialization. Without primary socialization, secondary socialization is virtually impossible, very difficult at best. Owners who let the primary socialization window pass may end up with a dog that is shy and afraid of any new people or experiences.