

Guide to Raising a Charmer

A yearlong guide to your dog's socialization process.

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Socialization Introducing your puppy to a wide variety of people, dogs, places and circumstances is as vital to your puppy's overall health as regular visits to the veterinarian and nutritionally balanced meals, say leading veterinarians who study the development of dogs. In fact, by 4 months of age, puppies should have met between 100 to 200 people and countless other dogs, inside and outside their homes, recommend experts. "The single best thing owners can do is properly socialize their puppies," says Andrew Luescher, D.V.M., Ph.D., a certified animal behaviorist and professor at Purdue University's School of Veterinary Medicine in West Lafayette, Indiana. "It's the best head start they can have for the rest of their lives." Bottom line: Play with your puppy with an eye toward socializing and be its tour guide to your world. "Puppies take work to raise in many ways, they are just like babies," says Nicholas Dodman, B.V.M.S., a veterinarian and director of the Behavior Clinic at Tufts University School of Veterinary Medicine in North Grafton, Massachusetts. "The more attention that you pay them as puppies, arranging for them to experience pleasant and happy circumstances, the more they will develop into happy, well-adjusted adults." Well-socialized puppies grow into welcomed members of households. "A common reason juvenile dogs are relinquished to animal shelters is because people often don't realize their roles in properly socializing and training their puppies," says Karen Overall, V.M.D., Ph.D., a veterinarian who conducts an animal behavior clinic at the University of Pennsylvania's School of Veterinary Medicine in Philadelphia. "You need to understand what your puppy's needs are and what is considered normal puppy behavior during its first year," explains Dr. Overall. "The sooner you can introduce fun and positive learning to your puppy, the less likely you'll have to deal with serious behavior problems when it becomes an adult." Martha Armstrong, of Poolesville, Maryland, heeds that advice. She and her husband, Bob, adopted 11-month-old Guinness, a retriever mix, on St. Patrick's Day from a local animal shelter. A few days later, she introduced Guinness to her neighbor's large adult dogs, Brice and Digby, a pair of Doberman-Boxer mixes. "My neighbor Marilyn had her two dogs on leashes, and we met while I was taking Guinness for a walk," says Armstrong, vice president of the Humane Society of the United States. "After a nose-to-butt greeting, all three dogs did play bows. Guinness weighs 60 pounds, so I was happy to know that he will have a couple of big, friendly adult dogs that he can play with." You can greatly improve your pup's training and socialization success by understanding what types of behaviors are normal and appropriate at each stage of its development. In most cases, puppies are adopted when they are weaned, usually after 8 weeks of age. Begin socializing your puppy on the first day you bring it home. The following chart identifies key physical and social developments in a puppy's life from 8 weeks of age to its one-year birthday. Next Step: Babes in Pupland: 2 to 3 Months