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Socializing Your Dog or Puppy Will Boost His Confidence and Make Him More Reliable

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How to create a reliably social, friendly, confident dog.

By Pat Miller

There was once a time when you rarely encountered the word “socialization” in dog circles. Today it’s the new training buzzword; if you haven’t heard it at least three dozen times by the time your dog is a dozen weeks old, you and your puppy must be living in a cave.

A half-century ago, no one talked about canine socialization because they didn’t need to. For the most part dogs wandered freely in their neighborhoods, accompanied kids to the school bus stop, hung out with canine pals all day, and became naturally socialized to their world and the people, dogs, and things they encountered in their daily travels. Sure, they got into occasional scuffles amongst themselves, but they sorted it out. Yes, a kid was bitten every now and then, but it was no big deal. Dogs got hit by cars from time to time, but that was part of life – sad, but one could always find another dog, preferably one who would be smart enough to stay out of the road.

Today a large segment of our pet-owning population is made up of more responsible canine guardians and caretakers. A nationwide paradigm shift has changed our attitudes about our dogs. No longer just “pets,” many of our beloved four-legged family members are kept inside our homes and in safely fenced yards, supervised closely when around children, and only encounter other dogs under controlled conditions – at training class, maybe during a brief on-leash greeting, during scheduled play dates, and perhaps at the dog park. The thought of our beloved dogs running free in the streets gives us heart palpitations, and we grieve terribly whenever we lose one.

On the plus side, this means our dogs live longer, physically healthier lives. On the minus side, it means they no longer benefit from the natural socialization process that occurred when they were allowed to explore their world and figure out how things work on their own. As a result, we’ve spawned a whole new behavior problem: undersocialization.

Building a social dog

Socialization is really classical conditioning – creating an association between two stimuli. Behavioral scientists have identified the period from 4 to 14 weeks as the most important window of time for a puppy’s social development. After the age of 14 weeks that window starts to close, and it closes pretty quickly. If a pup is super-socialized during this important developmental period he’ll most likely believe the world is a safe and happy place. If he’s not well-socialized, he’s likely to be neophobic, which means fearful of new things. This is a common condition in dogs rescued from puppy mills and hoarder situations. It is challenging to own and train a dog who is afraid of everything new he encounters; worse, the neophobic canine is also a strong candidate for developing fear-related aggression. (For more about fearful dogs, see [“Fear Itself \(/issues/10_4/features/Canine-Behavioral-Anxieties_15919-1.html\)”](http://www.whole-dog-journal.com/issues/10_4/features/Canine-Behavioral-Anxieties_15919-1.html), WDJ April 2007.)

Lack of exposure to new things is one cause of undersocialization; inappropriate exposure is another. If you’re not careful during your socialization efforts you may inadvertently set your pup up to create negative associations with parts of the world around him. In that case you can actually sensitize your pup to the things you’re introducing him to – that is, you can make him afraid of them – the exact opposite outcome of the one you want.

Think of the well-meaning soccer mom who takes the family’s brand-new nine-week old pup to watch her son’s team practice. The entire team suddenly spies the adorable fluffball and charges toward the pup to oogle over him. The terrified puppy screams, pees, and tries to run away when he sees a dozen giant human creatures coming toward him at a dead run. He can’t escape; he’s trapped by the leash, which panics him even more.

Mom sees the pup flailing at the end of the leash and scoops him up in her arms to calm him so the boys can pet him. Now he’s even more trapped! One boy reaches to pat him on the head, and the pup, thinking he may be about to die, as a last resort snaps at the lowering hand that appears poised to grab him. The boy yanks his hand away, and mom smacks the puppy for being “bad.”

How much worse could it get? This puppy now has an extreme fear of children, especially boys, thanks to at least three negative classical associations in rapid succession:

1. Boys/children are scary; they run toward you in large packs.
2. Boys/children are scary; they try to grab your head.
3. Boys/children make bad things happen – when they are nearby, mom becomes violent.

The pup may also have developed negative associations with the collar and leash, wide open fields, being picked up, and mom. In addition, he learned one important operant lesson – snapping is a successful behavioral strategy for making scary hands go away. None of these things are the lessons we want a young pup to learn! And now the puppy is labeled as “not good with children” and a “fear-biter.”

We often talk about how long it can take dogs to generalize operantly conditioned behaviors (if I do “x” I can make “y” happen). In contrast, dogs tend to form classically conditioned associations, especially those that produce strong emotions, very quickly.

The good news is that at nine weeks this pup’s socialization window is still wide open, and if his owner is smart she has time to repair the damage. Unfortunately, most owners don’t realize the importance of taking immediate steps to change a pup’s association if he has a bad experience at a young age.

Socialization is the process of giving a puppy positive associations with the people, places, and things in his world. You need to be sure he's having a great time, playing fun games, getting good stuff, and protected from scary stuff while you're teaching him that the world is a safe and happy place.

Early days

If you bring your new pup home when he's 8 weeks old, 4 of his 10 prime socialization weeks are already gone. Since a quarter to a half or more of a pup's most important socialization time has passed by the time he leaves his mother and moves into his forever home, it's vitally important that breeders invest time and energy into socializing their litters.

This includes having the pups walk and play on different substrates (grass, gravel, concrete, carpeting, and vinyl); inviting lots of different kinds of people over to play with and handle the pups; exposing them to household objects and sounds (microwave, telephone, television, vacuum cleaner); and making sure the baby dogs have positive associations with all these things.

Sadly, a small minority of breeders do a really good job of it, which contributes significantly to the population of under-socialized dogs in our world. If the breeder of your pup did her part, then your pup is already well-started on his super-socialization program. Now it's your responsibility to keep it up.

If your pup comes to you from a socially impoverished environment, you'll already see the signs of neophobia. You have no time to lose, and you may never be able to make up all the ground he's lost, but you can make him better than he'd be otherwise. Trainers talk about giving pups "100 new (positive) exposures in the first 100 days." If your pup is already showing signs of timidity or fear, triple that to 300 exposures in 100 days. And get busy!

Puppy classes

A well-run puppy class is one of the best places to find lots of positive socialization opportunities. Unfortunately, because of their fear of disease transmission, some veterinarians still caution their clients with puppies to keep their young canines safely at home until fully vaccinated, or at the very least until they have received a minimum of two shots, usually by the age of 12 weeks. Twelve weeks leaves only two weeks of critical socialization time – assuming there's a class starting up immediately after the pup receives his second shot. Not good enough!

We asked longtime positive trainer Gail Fisher of All Dogs Gym & Inn, located in Manchester, New Hampshire, to share her experiences with and thoughts on puppy classes. Here's her response:

"Regarding the question of puppy socialization versus risk of illness: We have been running puppy classes and play sessions for puppies as young as eight weeks since 1976 (which, incidentally, was before parvo!) In all this time, we have had a total of three puppies in our classes who were diagnosed with parvo (or anything worse than canine cough – a mild upper respiratory infection similar to the common cold).

"The first was a five-month-old Rottweiler (a breed known for having immunological issues – and beyond the age of a typical 'puppy' class). The second was a puppy from a breeder that had been in its new home for two weeks and who had received two shots, and the third was a pet shop puppy who had been purchased two days before starting class.

"More importantly, however, is the fact that no other puppies in any of those classes got sick. As soon as we heard from the owners of the sick puppies, we immediately contacted every other puppy owner to tell them to check with their veterinarian for advice on whether to have an additional inoculation. Some did, some didn't – but no one else got sick.

“So if you’re looking for ‘odds’ – in 33 years, figure (conservatively) 100 puppies a year, more than 3,000 puppies – the odds of a puppy getting sick from a well-run training class is virtually nil (less than 1/100th percent). The risks of illness are, in my opinion, negligible, while on the other hand, the advantages to socialization are unmeasurable.

“I hope this helps in your decision to take your puppy to training class!”

Playing in the gene pool Of course, your dog’s genetics also influence his behavior and social tendencies. Behavior is always a combination of genetics and environment. Nature and nurture. Always.

Genes dictate how easily reinforced a dog is for the things the environment tosses at him during his lifetime. Hence a dog who is genetically programmed to be reinforced by chasing things that move becomes a good herding dog, fox hound, or ratter. The difference is the herding dog is (hopefully) not programmed to be reinforced by killing the things he chases, while the hound and the terrier are.

Pups who are genetically programmed to be reinforced for the consequences of acting behaviorally bold are naturally easier to socialize, even if their first few weeks lacked stimulation, than ones who are genetically programmed to be reinforced for the results of acting timid or fearful. How do you know which behavioral genes your pup has for social behavior? You really don’t.

It’s useful to see your pup’s parents – at least the mother, if at all possible. If Mom is timid or aggressive there’s a good chance her pups will be, too. The pups’ behavior still can’t be attributed solely to genes; pups can learn fearful or aggressive behavior by watching their mother’s response to humans and other environmental stimuli, a behavioral phenomenon known as social facilitation. If you’ve been paying attention you’ll remember that genes and environment both play a role in behavior – always.

Don’t despair if you adopted your pup from a shelter or rescue group. It’s true that if you never see Mom or Dad, you won’t get any hints about their behavior. So how do you know how much socialization your pup needs to overcome any genetic weakness in temperament? You don’t. But you don’t need to. The answer to the genetic mystery is to super-socialize every single puppy, regardless of what you think you know, or don’t know, about his genetics. If you do that, you’re guaranteed to help your pup be everything he can be, socially speaking.

There’s no such thing as overkill when it comes to properly done socialization. You can’t do too much. Pups who are super-socialized tend to assume that new things they meet later in life are safe and good until proven otherwise. Dogs who are very well-socialized as pups are least likely to develop aggressive behaviors in their lifetimes. Pups who aren’t well-socialized tend to be suspicious and fearful of new things they meet throughout their lives, and are most likely to eventually bite someone. You’d better get out there and get started!

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Gail Fisher is the owner of All Dogs Gym & Inn in Manchester, New Hampshire.

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