

Socialization – It's Well Beyond the Dog Park

By Maureen Haggerty



What is socialization?

To be social means to be accepting and comfortable with the culture and behaviors of a community. Our dogs are forced to live within our human community, with human behaviors, and the sights and sounds of our culture. It is our responsibility to socialize our dogs so they can feel relaxed and not threatened as they go through life in our world.

Many of us know someone who has been bitten by a dog while they were reaching out to pet it. And then there is the poor rescue dog who was certainly abused by a prior family because he cowers when he sees men or a broom.

Most likely, these behaviors are not due to innate aggression or prior abuse, but rather, to a lack of socialization as a puppy. As a survival instinct, dogs assume what is unfamiliar to them as a potential threat, until they have had sufficient positive experiences to prove otherwise. When dogs feel threatened and they cannot escape, they use aggression to make the scary leave.

The Socialization Period

The most critical time to make sure your puppy is socialized is from about 3 weeks of age to around 16 weeks. This period of development is referred to as the socialization period.

During this time, puppies have a natural willingness to approach and investigate new things and form social relationships. With respect to both behavior and temperament development, this is absolutely the most influential period in a dog's life. Experiences that your puppy has during this socialization period, positive or negative, will affect her for the rest of her life.

The need for socialization, however, doesn't stop after four months of age. You need to continue socializing your puppy well through the first year. An older puppy or adult dog can also be socialized to new things or to things where a negative association has been developed, but it must be handled more delicately and will take more time. Consider contacting an experienced trainer to help you.

What Does Socialization Involve?

When we consider socializing our dogs, we mean exposing them to everything they can expect to see and experience in their lifetime, and to learn that these things are normal and not threatening.

Expose your puppy to different walking surfaces, sounds, people, clothing, human behavior, objects, dogs and any other animals he may have to encounter in his lifetime. Here are some ideas to get you thinking:

- Walking surfaces: linoleum, hardwood floors, sewer grate, gravel, metal, water, tall grass, rocks
- Sounds: noisy crowds, traffic, construction noises, thunder, dogs barking, babies crying, children playing, clapping
- People: men, women, tall, short, large, dark skin, light skin, beards and mustaches, children, teenagers
- People behavior: dancing, running, rollerblading, laughing, limping, kissing, embracing, wrestling
- People to dog behavior: hugs, kisses, being reached at, patted on the head, grabbed, brushed, bathed, nails clipped, grabbing at their paws, ears, and tail
- People clothing: big hats, backpacks, flowing skirts, masks, scarves, hoods
- Environments: solitude, crowds of people, lots of dogs, noisy, small space
- Dogs: all breeds, colors, coat/hair lengths, different play styles
- Objects: household appliances, umbrellas, brooms, rakes, metal dishes, things on wheels, leash, collar, dog crate
- Cats and other animals your puppy may be exposed to in his lifetime

How Should It Be Done?

To properly socialize your dog, you need to ensure his new encounters are positive experiences. Here are some basic rules of socialization:

- Never force or even encourage your dog to approach or do something he is unsure of. Even if it seems silly to you, like a lawn bag, let your puppy determine the when and how of the approach.
- Ensure that the encounter will be safe and pleasant. For example, if you are exposing your puppy to children who are in boisterous play, keep him at a safe distance, let him watch and feed him little treats to make a positive association with the experience.
- If an encounter goes badly, stay calm and neutral. You will need to repeat many positive encounters now to make up for one negative one. You can make the encounter positive through the use of treats, a happy voice or play.

Join a puppy kindergarten class that will provide socialization beyond puppy playtime. A knowledgeable instructor will help guide you through many opportunities to properly expose your puppy to various sights, sounds and behaviors of our human community.

~ The author of this article, Maureen Haggerty, CPDT, is owner of The Canine Coach, LLC; www.thek9coach.com.