

How and When To Socialize

by Nikki Litwin

Socializing dogs is a hot topic among trainers, breeders, and vets. Do we risk their health and take the puppy out and about? Or do we protect them and isolate them until they have all their shots?

I believe there is a happy middle ground. As a breeder, trainer, and rescue volunteer, I have been in the unique position to see the benefits of early socialization and the consequences of early isolation. Puppies go through many emotional and developmental stages in a very short amount of time. There is a “window of opportunity” to achieve the most benefit from early socialization and unfortunately, that “window” does not always coincide with the completion of their shots.



So how do we get around that? Here are a few suggestions to help you socialize your new pup as well as protect him until his shots are complete.

It is always a good idea to consult with your vet to make sure your puppy is in good health at all times. Most puppies stay with their mothers until they are 7 to 12 weeks old. That is a crucial time for the pup to learn about doggie manners and to begin the bond with people. They learn about bite inhibition from the mom and the other pups. When they bite each other in play, they learn that biting too hard can have consequences. If you have a puppy that did not have that learning lesson, you can imitate that lesson by yelping loudly when your pup bites you. The noise will startle them and make them realize that they hurt you.

Only when the dog returns to a calm, relaxed state, should you give him something appropriate to bite and chew on. This is their reward, as well as a distraction. You want them to concentrate on that object, but only when there is no confusion about the behavior you're rewarding. If you give it to them too soon, they may mistake the “treat” or toy, as a

consequence for being over-excited and biting. Practice this every time they start to get too involved with chewing on or biting you, especially when playing with them.

Meeting people and experiencing new situations is most critical during the 3 to 12 month old period. It is something that dogs need their whole life to stay social and to be reminded that our modern and busy society is a good and safe place, but it is most critical during that ever-changing developmental stage. A good goal with your pup is to make sure they meet at least five new people every week. You can do this by inviting neighbors, friends, or your children's friends over and having them bring a toy or treat for your pup when they visit. Even better would be to teach your pup to sit before receiving these "gifts" and then you are teaching greeting manners as well as socializing! If you have a limited pool of people to work with, have them come over wearing hats, sunglasses, costumes, strong cologne...anything that would make them look and smell different to the pup.

Puppies also need to experience new situations and environments when they are young. Show your pup the world in a positive and fun way. The secret is to avoid taking them to places where you are likely to run into strange dogs with no known shot history (therefore potentially exposing them to parvo or other dangerous viruses). As a rule, dog parks should be avoided for pups who haven't received all of their shots yet.

Have them on leash on your front yard when the neighborhood is most busy. Play with them, feed them yummy treats, and let them watch the world go by at a distance where they can be curious but not frightened. If something seems to make them especially nervous, find a distance where they can feel comfortable and work with them till they can move closer without fear. This is also a good time to teach and practice off-leash skills, such as "stay" and "come." Pups that learn boundaries early in life will be that much more disciplined as they get older.

Take your pup to the pet store and let them "shop" through the store. Let them smell and explore. This is an area of high distraction, so keep your own toy or treats with you to focus them on you and practice attention work with them. If someone wants to visit with your pup, that is a perfect time to practice your greeting manners and introduce them to a new person at the same time. If you are not comfortable with them being on the floor, bring a piece of cardboard to fit in the bottom of the shopping cart and let them ride through the store. This is a particularly good approach for small breeds as they won't feel so intimidated if people want to lean over them.

Go for coffee or ice cream with the family. Take the pup and let them watch the world go by while you are enjoying your time. Take a towel or small blanket with you and a special toy or treats for the pup to bring the focus back to you and teach the pup to stay on their “spot.” Again, look for those opportunities to work on greeting skills with strangers, and remember that the best time to do activities like this is after some good exercise! Go for a long walk or run before asking a puppy to stay still for an extended amount of time.

A great toy to take along is a Kong stuffed with peanut butter that has been frozen. The pup will lie down and work at getting that peanut butter out and be calm for quite a long time. Bring a plastic, zip lock bag to store the Kong for travel. It keeps things neat and tidy!!

Socializing can be easy and fun and should be part of the total approach to training your new pup. Begin training early and begin socializing even earlier. Enjoy the process – you will soon have the most perfect, balanced, friendly pup that everyone adores!

Nikki Litwin is the owner of **Total Dog Training in Los Angeles**. She has been training dogs for 22 years and specializes in proper puppy raising and rehabilitating shy dogs. Her passion for dogs includes showing and competing with her German wirehaired pointers and Cavalier King Charles spaniels.