

## The Loving Action Every Dog Needs but Too Few Receive

It can mean the difference between a dog that drives you, your vet and your groomer crazy — versus one that's practically a soul mate and gets along with nearly everyone. And it's not rocket science to get their compliance. It's as simple as this.

Reviewed by [Dr. Becker](#)

### STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Puppies not given a full range of appropriate socialization opportunities by about 10 weeks of age can develop fear of the unfamiliar and other problem behaviors
- Socialization means exposing your puppy to as many new positive experiences (people, animals, environments and other stimuli) as possible, and should engage all her senses through exposure to the sights, sounds and smells of daily life
- Dogs who haven't been properly socialized may become generally fearful, difficult to handle, noise-sensitive, nervous around other dogs and people, and frightened of exploring their world
- Tips for socializing a puppy include enrolling in puppy class, inviting a variety of people and pets to visit your home, taking puppy out of his environment regularly to expose him to unfamiliar objects and noises, and getting him used to being handled
- There are also many things you can do to socialize an adult dog, including enrolling in obedience classes and canine competitive events, and arranging regular play dates with friendly dogs

***Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published April 9, 2018.***

Have you taken some time to socialize your puppy or adult dog today? Veterinarians, animal shelter staffs and an ever-growing number of pet parents are learning the far-reaching consequences of unsocialized puppies who mature into unbalanced adult dogs. Puppies, like children, can't grow into healthy adults without our help and guidance.

### The Ideal Time to Socialize a Pup

Puppies go through several development stages on their journey to maturity:

- Between 4 and 8+ weeks, puppies learn how to interact with other dogs
- Between 5 and 10+ weeks, they develop skills necessary to interact with humans
- Between 5 and 16 weeks, they are most open to investigating new environments and stimuli; puppies not given a full range of socialization opportunities by about 10 weeks can develop fear of the unfamiliar

It's the responsibility of the humans caring for puppies to take maximum advantage of each sensitive stage by providing age-appropriate social and learning opportunities.

Puppies who aren't properly socialized during their first 3 months are at dramatically increased risk for behavior problems like aggression, fear and avoidance. Sadly, dogs with problems stemming from lack of early socialization fill animal shelters and rescue facilities in every city and state across the country.

## What Does Socialization Mean, Exactly?

Socialization means exposing your puppy to as many new people, animals, environments and other stimuli as possible without overwhelming him. Over-stimulation of a young puppy can result in behaviors that are the opposite of what you're hoping for — such as excessive fear, withdrawal or avoidance — so knowing how much is enough is important. A well-socialized puppy is:

- Handled from birth and learns to accept touching of all body parts
- Positive exposure to as many people, other animals, places and situations as possible
- Encouraged to **explore and investigate** his environment
- Allowed to experience a variety of toys and games, surfaces, and other stimuli
- Regularly brought along on car rides to new environments with his owner

Socialization should engage all of your puppy's senses through exposure to the sights, sounds and smells of daily life. This exposure will help her develop a comfort level with new and different situations, with the result that she'll learn to handle new experiences and challenges with acceptable, appropriate behavior.

Dogs who haven't been adequately socialized often develop entrenched fear responses and generalized anxiety, resulting in behavior problems that can make them very difficult to live with.

In fact, almost half of all dogs relinquished to shelters have at least one behavior problem — aggression and destructiveness are among the most common. These behaviors often originate from the fear and anxiety that develops as a result of improper or incomplete socialization.

## Five Common Characteristics of Dogs Who Aren't Well-Socialized

1. **They're fearful** — Fear-based responses often take the form of separation anxiety, storm and/or noise phobia, or aggression. Fearfulness often manifests as aggression, when the underlying problem is actually the opposite of what it looks like. Dogs who haven't been adequately socialized don't have the skills they need to respond appropriately in stressful situations.

In addition, a chronic, prolonged fear response can cause both physical and emotional disease processes that can potentially shorten your dog's life and negatively impact his quality of life. Chronic stress can depress the immune system, putting your dog at higher risk for opportunistic infections. It can trigger the development of compulsive behaviors, and it can also alter blood flow to vital organs.

2. **They're difficult to handle** — Pups who haven't been acclimated to lots of human handling from their noses to the tip of their tails can become hard to manage as adult dogs. Not only will you have a tough time handling him, but so will his veterinarian, trainer, groomer and pet sitter.
3. **They're noise-sensitive** — Dogs who haven't been socialized to a wide range of normal stimuli in the environment can develop anxiety about the noises made by everyday household items, such the vacuum

cleaner or blender, the low-battery warning beep of a smoke detector — even the ceiling fan.

Outside, noise-sensitive dogs tend to be anxious and jumpy on windy days, when cars pass by and in the presence of garbage trucks and lawn mowers, among other things. And while noise sensitivity doesn't cause the same level of discomfort as, for example, full-blown thunderstorm phobia, it certainly causes stress for both dog and dog parent.

4. **They're anxious around other dogs and/or people** — Dogs who aren't socialized to other dogs as puppies and continually throughout their lives often become very wary of other dogs. This anxiety can cause your dog to either look for a way to escape when she encounters an unfamiliar dog, or it can cause her to act aggressively.

The same situation exists with dogs who haven't been socialized to a variety of people, including children, the elderly and really any person who doesn't resemble the dog's immediate human family members.

5. **They're frightened of going and doing** — Dogs who've been inadequately socialized to rides in the car, travel in general, and exploring new places and spaces tend to view everything beyond their front door as scary and to be avoided. Needless to say, this makes taking your dog along with you on adventures much more challenging because his anxiety cancels out his natural curiosity and desire to explore the world around him.

## 6 Tips for Socializing Your Puppy

- Enroll your puppy in a professionally run, positive puppy class. These classes involve minimal exposure to health risks and can deliver tremendous benefits for both you and your pup, including increasing his responsiveness to commands, teaching him bite inhibition, and learning tips for successful housetraining and how to prevent hyperactivity.
- Invite friends and family over to meet and interact with your puppy on a daily basis. Try to include people of varying ages and ethnicities, especially children if you don't have any, and both genders. Also invite gentle, healthy dogs, puppies and cats to your home to meet and interact with your pup, and regularly take your puppy for visits to other friendly pet-owning households.
- Make sure your puppy is exposed to unfamiliar or out-of-place objects around your house and outdoor environment so he'll be less likely to startle or be fearful of changes.

It's also important to get him accustomed to hearing a variety of sounds, for example, the vacuum cleaner, the lawn mower, outside traffic, a blow dryer, a plastic or paper trash bag being snapped open, the TV, radio, video games, etc. The goal is never to frighten your pup, but to expose him to new sounds. Life is noisy; he needs to learn that everyday sounds are no big deal.

- Get your puppy used to being bathed and brushed, having her nails clipped, her teeth brushed, and her ears and other body parts handled and examined. This will help her get used to being handled, which will make future baths, nail trims, oral care, and visits to the vet and groomer easier on everyone involved.
- Keep things positive. You should start socializing your pup from his first day home with you, but don't overwhelm him. Set the stage and then let him set the pace. Don't hurry or force his progress, and keep socialization sessions frequent but brief, and always upbeat. Modify the type of socialization based on the personality and response of your puppy.

- When your puppy shows hesitance or fear, resist the urge to reward fearful behavior with a lot of attention and affection. Stay close to reassure him he's safe, but take care not to inadvertently reinforce unwanted behavior.

Remember: Socializing your puppy should be an enjoyable, satisfying experience for both of you — one that will pay dividends for the rest of your life together. There is no greater joy than a well-adjusted, balanced four-legged member of the family.

## 6 Tips for Socializing Your Adult Dog

- Obedience classes provide an environment where all the dogs are kept under control. This can be very helpful if your pet seems wary or fearful around other dogs. Organized classes give him the opportunity to be around other pups, but from a slight distance. Make sure classes are not fear-based dominance training, which will exacerbate anxiety.
- If you have friends with dogs, arrange play dates with one compatible dog at a time. Put your dog and his pal in a safe, enclosed area and let them get to know each other. This is a nice low-pressure social situation in which your pup can hone his skills without being overwhelmed by too many dogs, or an overly dominant dog.
- If it makes sense for you and your dog, get involved in dog agility competitions. These events provide a great opportunity for your dog to be around other dogs and people while getting lots of exercise, mental stimulation and shared time with you.
- If agility isn't appealing, there are lots of other activities that might be, including flying disc, dock jumping or dock diving, flyball, flygility, herding, hunt and field trials, musical freestyle, and **nose work**, to name just a few. Dogplay is a good resource for exploring organized exercise and socialization possibilities for your dog.
- Another wonderful socialization activity you can share with your pet, depending on his temperament and personality, is training to be an emotional support dog for pet therapy programs. These dogs and their owners visit hospitals, nursing homes, detention units, rehab facilities, certain schools, senior citizen apartments and other places where people aren't permitted to keep pets or aren't able to care for them.
- Finally, never underestimate the socialization value of regular daily walks with your dog. You both get fresh air, stress relief, perhaps some aerobic exercise, and opportunities to encounter old and new two- and four-legged friends.

There's also a wonderful program for all new parents of adopted or rescued dogs that helps them adjust to a new home in the least stressful manner. You can find it at **[A Sound Beginning](#)**, and you can immediately begin using the book's tips and tricks and the calming music CD on your dog's first day home. If you have a super-shy dog and need to build confidence at home while working on training issues, visit **[Recallers](#)**.

## Sources and References

[PetMD](#)

---