

# Half of All Dogs Relinquished to Shelters Share This Trait

It's one of the most important things you can do for your pet. But many pet parents make serious mistakes in the process, feel it's not important or do it in all the wrong places. And make no mistake, these six venues can cause far more problems than they solve. Be wise.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Many dog parents don't realize the importance of socialization; almost half of all dogs relinquished to shelters have at least one behavior problem directly related to improper or incomplete socialization
- In a nutshell, socialization means exposing your dog to as many new people, animals, environments and other stimuli as possible without overwhelming him
- The socialization process can start at 7 to 8 weeks of age, and if possible, should include a professionally run puppy class
- Events that are often inappropriate as socialization opportunities for dogs include parades, craft fairs, parties, concerts and children's sporting events
- Instead, invite friends, family and other pets to your home to interact with your dog, and take her for visits to other pet-owning households

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Sadly, many dog parents either don't understand what socializing a dog involves, or don't feel it's important, but nothing could be further from the truth.

In fact, most vets now believe the risk of lack of socialization far outweighs the chance that a partially immunized puppy will contract an infection at a socialization class.

And while we don't recommend visits to the dog park (or other settings where there will be lots of unfamiliar dogs) until a puppy is at least 6 months old, we do recommend professionally run positive training classes to help young dogs acquire critically important social skills.

The socialization process can start at 7 to 8 weeks and should continue throughout your pet's life. Enrolling your little one in a professionally run puppy class involves minimal exposure to health risks and can deliver tremendous benefits for both of you, including:

1. Increasing your pup's responsiveness to commands
2. Teaching bite inhibition through puppy play, and proper interaction with people, including strangers

3. Learning tips for successful house training and how to prevent hyperactivity — two of the most common reasons given by owners who relinquish their dogs to shelters
4. Developing realistic expectations for your dog
5. Strengthening your bond with your puppy

## Why Socialization Is So Important for Puppies

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 excessive fear, withdrawal or avoidance behavior, so knowing how much is enough is important. A well-socialized puppy is:

1. Handled from birth and learns to accept touching of all body parts
2. Exposed to as many people, other animals, places and situations as possible
3. Encouraged to explore and investigate his environment
4. Allowed to experience a variety of toys and games, surfaces and other stimuli
5. Brought along often 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 your pup develop a comfort level with new and different situations, with the result that he'll learn to handle new experiences and challenges with acceptable, appropriate behavior.

Dogs who have not been adequately socialized often develop entrenched fear responses and generalized anxiety, resulting in behavior problems that can make them unsuitable as family pets. 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.

## Where NOT to Socialize Your Puppy (or Adult Dog)

As a general rule, events that are designed for human entertainment are not ideal for most dogs. Canines and humans experience the environment around them very differently. Often what's fun and interesting for us is the opposite for our dog (and vice versa).

When you take your canine companion along on an outing, it should be to places and events that won't make her anxious, and where you can continuously interact with her. Dog trainer Victoria Schade, writing for PetMD, lists six people venues your dog would probably prefer to avoid:<sup>1</sup>

1. **Parades** — Parades can be sensory-overload experiences for dogs. While you're tapping your foot to the beat of the marching band or waving to the mayor riding by on a float, your dog is down below on hot pavement and is apt to be overwhelmed if not actually frightened by the crowds, strange noises and excitement.
2. **Craft fairs** — Unless you're just making a quick pass through the local craft fair on your way to the park or a hiking trail with your dog, there's a good chance he'll be bored quickly with the outing, or feel anxious as he tries to avoid being stepped on by the distracted humans all around him.

3. **House parties** — Unless it's an event specifically designed for doggy partygoers, most human-oriented house parties present many challenges for dogs and their guardians. For example, if you bring your dog, you'll have to split your attention between her and everyone else at the party.

As Schade points out, "Pet parents at parties might be surprised to discover that the event becomes an exercise in dog management rather than a good time." Indoor parties present opportunities for your dog to temporarily lose her house training. Outdoor parties can present the opportunity for your dog to slip through an open gate and out into the street. The presence of children can present unique challenges for your dog, as can parties who've had one too many cocktails.

4. **Concerts** — Even if your dog loves music, live outdoor concerts not only mean crowds and too-warm temps, but also amplified music that might be too much for his sensitive hearing. If he starts to whine or howl or try to escape, it will be a major disruption for other concertgoers. Better to leave Buddy at home with some dog-friendly tunes on the iPod.
5. **Kids' sporting events** — These outings tend to last for hours, so your dog is apt to get antsy. In addition, according to Schade:

*"Many new pet parents think it's a good idea to bring their puppy to their children's games for a quick injection of socialization. However, puppies attract people, and groups of well-meaning but overwhelming **children might worry your pup**. Appropriate socialization is easily controlled and allows the dog to set the pace. Situations where dogs are forced to deal with whatever the mob doles out can be stressful and do more harm than good."*

6. **Dog parks** — Even though they're called DOG parks, they're not a good option for every dog, and despite conventional wisdom that says the best place to socialize a dog is at the dog park, they're an exceptionally bad idea for dogs who aren't socialized. If your pet is fearful of other dogs, aggressive or if you have little or no control over him (i.e., he doesn't respond to your commands), taking him to a dog park is asking for trouble.

*"Dog parks are meant for dogs that are already social with their peers, not for those in need of socialization," says Schade. "Taking a socially questionable dog to the park puts everyone at risk. The action moves quickly and requires that the players understand the rules of engagement."*

*If your dog hasn't had ongoing, positive experiences with a variety of other dogs off leash, he might misinterpret the play and react inappropriately."*

In order for the dog park to be a good experience for your pet and for you, your dog should enjoy interacting with others in a friendly way. If he doesn't go near other dogs due to fear, or if he approaches most unfamiliar dogs aggressively, this behavior should be addressed before you attempt a visit to a dog park.

## **Additional Socialization Tips**

Invite friends and family over to meet and interact with your dog. 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 dog. You can also take her for visits to other pet-owning households.

Make sure she's exposed to unfamiliar or out-of-place objects around your house so she'll be less likely to startle or be fearful of changes in her environment.

It's also important to get her 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 her to new sounds. Life is noisy; she needs to learn that everyday sounds are non-threatening.

Get your puppy used to being bathed and brushed, having her nails trimmed, her teeth brushed and her ears and other body parts touched 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.

Keep things positive. You should start socializing your pup from her first day home with you, but don't overwhelm her. Set the stage and then let her set the pace. Don't hurry or force her progress, and keep socialization sessions frequent but brief, and always upbeat. Socializing your dog should be an enjoyable, satisfying experience for both of you — one that will pay dividends for the rest of your life together.

## **Sources and References**

<sup>1</sup> [PetMD March 21, 2017 \(Archived\)](#)

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