



Puppy Socialization: The Key to Raising a Confident Pup is a Series of Positive Mini-Adventures

What is puppy socialization? Puppy socialization is a gradual and continuous process of providing your pup positive introductions and/or encounters to as many different experiences as possible. Positive socialization is critical to your puppy's development. It helps him become accustomed to the variety of sights, sounds, environments, people, animals, etc. that he will encounter in life.

When to socialize your pup? From the day you bring home your pup (typically at 8 weeks old), start positive socialization. Don't bring your pup to a loud, noisy construction site on his first day! Because puppies mature very quickly, you want to get in as many positive encounters and experiences as you can through 20 weeks old (5 months). These first few months are most critical. Be sure you set aside time to set up your "mini adventures" with your pup so that you can get as many positive experiences as possible by 5 months of age. When he reaches 5 months old, don't stop socializing. Be sure to continue to socialize your pup after 5 months and understand that he's in a period of development that makes it more challenging for him to easily experience and approach new things things/people/places. Keep socializing your pup through his first year. You and your pup will be incredibly grateful for the time and effort you put in!

What is the #1 Rule for Puppy Socialization? Never, for any reason, force your pup to approach, be near, or interact with someone or something that appears to overwhelm and/or frighten him. Forcing your pup will cause him to form a negative association with the object/person/place. Remember that your goal is to form as many positive associations as possible!

How do you socialize your pup? Use both happy praise and super yummy treats to positively associate your pup's new experiences. This enables him to build a positive association with the new things he's experiencing. As your pup approaches something or someone new, watch for his reaction. If he's relaxed, then stay at that distance. Look for him to give you his "auto-please" sit. If he does, praise and reward heavily! You can also ask for a sit. When he sits, praise and reward and release him. The goal is to have him associate the new experience with positive rewards so that when he sees new people/things, he predicts that good things will happen (yummy treats from you). Note that he does not need to be fed treats by every person he meets! It's important that he "sees" lots of different people and that they are paired with praise and treats from you.

What to do if your pup is showing fearful behavior or is super-excited? If you see your pup is overwhelmed or super-aroused (lunging, bouncing, barking, etc.) or he's not willing or interested in food, then you are beyond his threshold. Back-up. Recall that like a human, your pup has a threshold for fear and/or stress. If you see that he's fearful or over-aroused, back away from the source until he's no longer stressed. Hang out at this safe distance. Praise and treat him for his calm behavior. See if he offers an auto-sit. Praise and treat generously. Ask for a sit. Praise and treat generously. Very slowly and very gradually approach. This can mean as little as half a step forward. Don't rush or push. There's no good outcome to pushing and rushing. Always end on a positive note; that is, quit while you're ahead. You can always try this experience again another day.

How much socialization does your pup need? The more you socialize your pup, the more confident, comfortable, and stable he can become as he matures into an adult dog. While it's impossible to expose your pup to everything, an adult dog who's been positively socialized with a wide range of experiences is often better at handling new and different experiences throughout life.

Socialization isn't a one-time event. You don't want to flood your pup and mark everything off the checklist in one week. Think of socialization as a series of small adventures that you take with your pup over time. This way, you socialize your pup gradually and repetitively throughout his development.

Think of your daily life and how your pup will be a part of it for years to come. Your socialization should include how you live your life. Don't limit yourself to this or any check list. For example: Do you like to hike? Do you attend outdoor sporting events such as baseball games? Soccer games? Do you like to go to fairs or parades? Do you like to stroll through downtown? Do you take walks around your neighborhood? Do you go to the beach? Do you like to go out on a motorized boat? Do you have a hobby or job where you use machinery? Do you like to kayak or canoe? Do you fish? Do you ride a motorcycle? Do you ride horses? Do you ride an ATV? Do you own horses or livestock? Do you like to go camping – RV or tent? With your pup, you'll be sharing some, if not many of these activities. Positive socialization will enable you and your pup (and later, your adult dog) to better enjoy life!

Do you need to socialize your pup with other dogs? Yes, passionately and emphatically, yes, yes, yes! You want to enroll in a puppy class where your pup learns how to properly socialize with other pups. While part of a puppy class may cover basic obedience skills, you want part of the class devoted to puppy play time (puppy interaction). This is very helpful for your pup. He learns to identify, understand and display canine body language. Essentially, he learns to communicate with other dogs. He learns to read dog! When you are researching a puppy class, be sure that the play time is well supervised so that it's a learning experience. Often, pups are grouped by age, size, and sometimes play style" so that the pups have the best experience possible.

Do you still need puppy class if you already have a dog? Yes! If your pup only meets and knows your other dog (or dogs), he doesn't learn to read and communicate with a range of different dogs. He becomes familiar and comfortable only with his own. Recall that puppies don't generalize very easily. Other dogs look and act differently. You you're your puppy to be comfortable with seeing strange new dogs. Puppy socialization is critical, even when you already have another dog (or multiple dogs) at home.

[Download a handy puppy socialization checklist.](#)