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Your Smart Dog

Socialize Your Dog: What, How, When, Where

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Everyone wants a dog they can take with them everywhere, a dog who behaves and minds his manners, a dog who doesn't embarrass them.

Everyone wants that, but how do you get a dog like that? It takes work. A lot of it.. It's not necessarily *hard work*, but it is work. Regardless of the age of your dog, socialization is important and dogs – even older ones – can learn social skills. This month's newsletter talks about how to get that dream dog.

So what exactly is socialization, anyway? In a nutshell, socialization happens when you expose your dog to new and varied situations. Ideally, socialization happens in puppyhood. Specifically, the prime time for socialization occurs between about the first five and sixteen weeks of your pup's life. Think about it: you get your puppy at eight weeks. You've only got eight weeks to get that puppy out so he meets as many different people, as many different dogs, experiences new sights, sounds, and smells as possible. **It takes planning and flexibility to properly socialize a puppy.**

But what if you didn't get your dog when he was a pup? Never fear, **you can still socialize your dog even if he's older.** It will likely take longer to socialize, and you probably won't make the same progress as if you'd done the same steps with your dog when he was a pup, but old dogs *can learn* new tricks.

Why should you socialize your dog. What difference does it make, anyway? Properly done, socialization gives your dog the tools he'll need to be a laid-back, well-adjusted dog no matter where he is or what's going on. Puppies that experience many different sights and sounds learn how to adapt, how to bounce back from surprises. Dogs that haven't had that experience don't adapt or bounce back – they very often bark, growl, hide, or try to run from the new situation or the new people. It's not fun for the dog, nor is it fun for you or your friends. They're not behaving badly on purpose, they're simply over stimulated. They need more practice in that situation before they can behave normally.

Now you know how important socialization is, let's talk about the particulars of how, where and when to socialize your dog.

How

As I said earlier, socialization takes planning. **Socialization needs to be fun.** You can't force socialization on your dog or you risk shutting your dog down. Always watch your dog for signs of stress: lip-licking, tail down, ears back, growling, lip-lifting (snarling), barking, avoiding eye contact, or trying to run away. If you see any of these signs, you might want to postpone the effort and figure out how to better control the circumstances so your dog isn't stressed.

Take yummy treats with you when you take your dog out in public. Don't be stingy here – I'm talking chicken or beef! Real meat in tiny pea-sized pieces. When you enter the new situation, take a few moments and stand on the fringe. Let your dog get his bearings. Feed him some of that yummy treat. If he's too worked up to eat, he's probably stressed out – take him further away from the situation until he's calmer and able to take treats.

When you are out with your pup or your dog to socialize, he is your top priority. If your dog isn't having fun, gets scared, or otherwise isn't comfortable, you must be ready to leave immediately. So if you know you can't leave – don't take the dog with you.

WHEN

If you have a puppy (8 – 20 weeks), get that puppy out as soon as your vet says it's safe. Generally, I like my pups to have their first set of inoculations and I keep them on a very tight schedule for the remainder of their vaccinations. Your puppy should be meeting at least two new people every day between the age of 8 and 20 weeks. And at least one new dog every day as well. Stop and think about that for a moment – that means seven *new* dogs and twenty *new* people each week. **It's not good enough for your dog to meet the same five dogs and the same ten people over and over.** You've got to get out there and actively look for new and friendly people with friendly dogs.



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I couldn't get along without a quality doggie daycare. In daycare, my pup can appropriately meet many different dogs in a safe manner. **All doggie daycares are not alike, so beware!** Ask specific questions such as: what is the dog to person ratio in daycare, how do you handle doggie disagreements, how do you screen your dogs, what is the resting schedule, how do you introduce a new dog to the group, how can you tell if a pup isn't enjoying himself, etc. If your daycare can't answer these questions, keep looking for a qualified daycare. You're actually putting your pup at risk if you put him in the hands of an unqualified daycare.

If your dog is older, you can still socialize, but you'll need to take some extra time and have an extra dose of patience. Older dogs have already formed opinions about the world. It takes time to teach them new things.

WHERE

I like to socialize my pups where I have the most control over the environment. So I never go to dog parks to socialize my pups or my dogs. I can't control who is there, what dogs are there, or what the dogs do to my dog. I avoid dog parks altogether. Places I love to take my pups: outdoor eating establishments (ice cream shops, for instance); walks in the park, neighborhood gatherings, and outdoor events that are relatively calm.

I always take my delicious treats with me and reinforce my puppy for calm and appropriate behavior. I also ask strangers to feed the treats to my pup. I want my pup to think that all kinds of people are good: small, shriek-y children, large men wearing hats, kids on bicycles, loud groups of people, people on crutches or in wheelchairs, and even regular everyday-Joe's.

Also think about what you want your pup to see besides just people. I want my pup to see bicycles, strollers, big buses, large dump trucks, little scooters, horses, big dogs, little dogs, barky dogs, quiet dogs, high-heeled shoes, shopping carts, people wearing hats and hoodies, people with pony-tails, inside the veterinary office, the woods, the city, a crowded sidewalk, a quiet nature trail, a river, a lake, the ocean, a pier/dock over the water, sand, gravel, pavement, mulch...the list goes on forever. It's important to think of as many different sights, sounds, and locations as possible.

Common Mistakes

The most common mistake people make:

1. Let unknown or unfriendly dogs meet your dog. **If you don't know the dog, don't assume he's pleasant.** Ask first. If you don't get a good vibe from either the owner or the dog, keep walking! Don't have a long play session – just a quick 10 seconds then move on.
2. Assume that because your dog sees dogs in the house or in the neighborhood, that they don't need to be socialized. Your dog needs to see more than just the neighborhood dogs to be socialized.
3. Force your dog to say hi. If your dog doesn't want to approach another dog or person, don't drag him over to do so. Respect what your dog is telling you – move at his pace.

A quality training class for you and your dog is also helpful to socialize your dog and to teach him how to behave in public. Check your area for a Karen Pryor Certified Training Partner (<http://karenpryoracademy.com/find-a-trainer>). If you need help finding a qualified trainer in your area, please drop me a line. I'm happy to help.

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