



# Properly Socializing Your Puppy



**Your most important job as a new puppy parent is to develop a well-adjusted puppy. Think of socialization as a vaccine for future behavioral issues, fears, phobias, and aggression. Socialization is a cushion for any scary experiences that you are unable to prevent later on in life.**

While curiosity and the ability to learn don't have expiration dates, young puppies have an important behavioral "sweet spot" between the ages of 7 and 16 weeks. During this critical period, your dog builds their impressions and attitudes about what is normal and acceptable in her world. This time more than any other, positive experiences with the world create a solid foundation for the rest of their life. Think of this as if you are "programming" your puppy.

After this critical period is over, it becomes an issue of reprogramming instead of programming. Negative world views (such as strangers being scary) are more difficult and time-consuming to unlearn than preventing them in the first place.

## Keep Your Puppy's Experiences Positive

Socialization is about exposing your puppy to new things and monitoring those interactions to ensure they're positive. Though puppies can seem precociously unflappable, they are sensitive souls who can quickly become overwhelmed. Your job is to gauge the tenor of a situation by reading your puppy's body language. In the buffet of sensory stimulations that your puppy encounters, make sure their experience is a quick snack rather than a binge. Create frequent short sessions where you can be focused on your puppy.

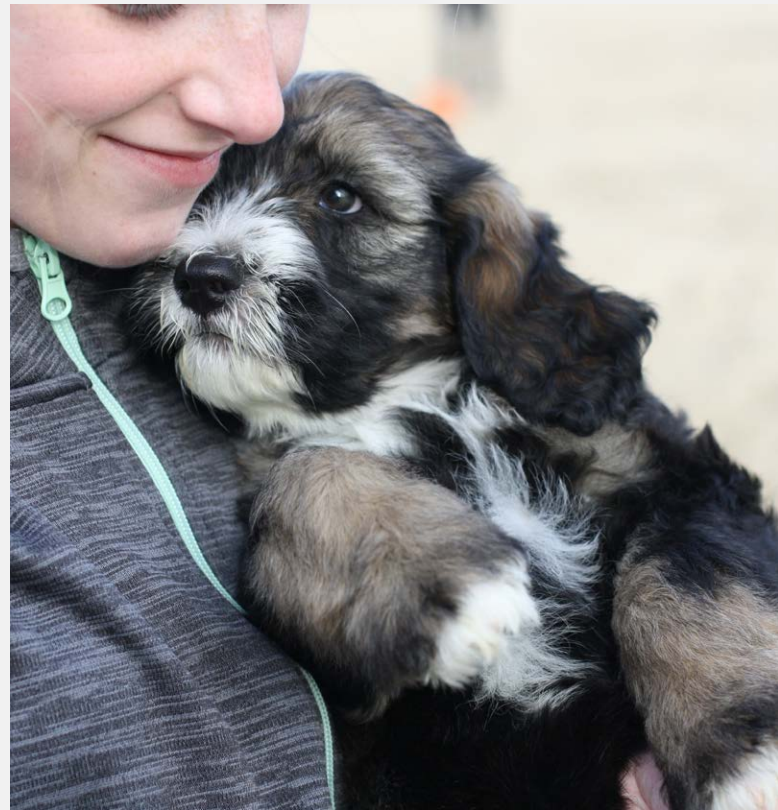
- Pair all experiences with tasty treats and happy praise. Here are a few ideas:
- For a ride in the car, give a long lasting chew that they can enjoy the whole trip.
- When meeting a new friend, feed your puppy small pieces of chicken while you approach and while the friend pets them. If your puppy is relaxed and happy during the interaction, have the friend feed them too.
- Instead of feeding them dinner all at once out of a bowl, set up a puppy obstacle course full of new surfaces, textures, and even things that move slightly. Then scatter the kibble all over the course. It will slow down how fast they eat and creates an association with walking on unfamiliar surfaces. Cheer them along as they explore!

## Never Force a Scared or Stressed Puppy

If your puppy clings to you, if they yawn, try to escape, or turn away, they are stressed. Forcing the puppy will make it worse. Fearful experiences during this time are just as potent as positive ones and will have lifelong effects. Pay attention and let the puppy go at their own pace.

Inevitably, your puppy will encounter a situation or person that frightens them. Give them space (increasing distance) and support (praise and food) to come to terms with the scary thing. Retreat while

feeding them treats, praising at a distance. When the puppy still notices what scares them but is not showing concern, you have succeeded. If you can make the scary thing less scary (have the person sit down on the floor, take off the hat, or turn down the volume), that is a good strategy too. Most importantly, do not ignore the fearful behavior. Old school style training recommends this, but those theories have been debunked.



## Places NOT to take your Puppy

1. Off-leash dog parks: Until they are fully vaccinated, they are off-limits. Once your pup has had vaccinations, we still recommend being picky about which parks you take them to. Ensure your dog has a reliable recall, doesn't resource guard, and isn't bullying or getting bullied.
2. Avoid places your dog can encounter stray, sick, or aggressive dogs.
3. Stay clear of areas where your dog can encounter aggressive/rowdy/drunk humans.

4. Steer clear of places where there is an accumulation of feces from unknown dogs.
5. Do not bring your pup any place they are not welcome.
6. Never leave your dog unattended or in a hot car.
7. Avoid places where they will be uncomfortable or frightened (sitting in the full sun while you watch your son's Little League game, at a July 4th fireworks display, at a motorcycle rally, etc).
8. Any place where you won't be able to devote enough attention to him to secure his safety, security and wellbeing.



## Expose Puppies to...

### **NEW PEOPLE OUT IN THE WORLD:**

We all want our dogs to be comfortable meeting and greeting strangers out in the world. To grow into dogs that can they need to have positive interactions with people out in the world as puppies. Remember to meet a diverse range of people of different ethnicities, sizes, and genders!

### **NEW PEOPLE AT HOME:**

While taking your puppy out into the world can help; you also need to bring diverse people and dogs into your home to socialize with your puppy. Puppies who don't positively experience other dogs and strangers coming into their house are at risk for later becoming territorial.

### **A VARIETY OF SENSORY EXPERIENCES:**

We ask dogs to be comfortable with many things that don't come naturally; riding in cars, being picked up and restrained, walking on a leash, and walking through crowds of people. Socialization is also about acclimating a puppy to all sorts of experiences with loud sounds, new surfaces to walk and climb on, things that move quickly or oddly, wildlife, and being out having fun in and pottying in all types of weather.

### **HANDLING:**

We often take for granted that most dogs enjoy getting touched, pet, and are tolerant of restraint. Puppies are so cute that it's difficult to give them autonomy over their bodies. Puppies should have the right to say no and will do so by squirming in your arms, vocalizing, and moving away from your hands. Respect these attempts. Old school methods of holding puppies until they are "calm" or forcing a puppy to accept petting are not valid forms of training. We need to make all handling experiences enjoyable for puppies, so they grow up to be dogs that enjoy and seek out affection and are not uncomfortable or display aggression when gently restrained.

## Puppy Kindergarten

Puppy kindergarten classes are a great way for puppies as young as eight weeks old to meet other dogs and people. These classes are not a continuous playtime, but also shouldn't be a glorified obedience class. Obedience is the easy part, and you have a lifetime to teach that to your dog but, the time for that puppy socialization foundation is finite. Baby puppies should be learning more general life skills, like how to accept handling and grooming, how to enjoy strangers, and learning bite inhibition.



## What Vets Say About Puppy Socialization

Surprisingly, one of the biggest obstacles to proper puppy socialization can come from some veterinarians. While no veterinarian wants to see a carefree puppy develop into a growling hermit, his or her primary focus is reducing your puppy's exposure to infectious disease. As a result, many vets insist that their clients not take puppies out into the world until their booster vaccine series is complete and they are fully immunized. Boosters typically happen at 16 weeks – just when the vitally important socialization window begins to slam shut.

While we understand why many vets are cautious, it can unwittingly create a life-threatening situation. Behavioral problems are the number one reason dogs return to shelters. It is more likely an unsocialized dog might be euthanized for a behavioral issue than a socialized dog coming down with parvovirus or kennel cough.

You will find the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behaviors Position Statement on socialization in your adoption folders. Share with your vet if they object to your puppy leaving the house before vaccinations.

Speaking of vets, remember to socialize your puppy in your vet's office. Feel free to visit even if you have no reason to go. Happy visits will teach your dog the vet's office is safe and fun.



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