

Puppy Socialization...Ask a Trainer

By: Nan Arthur, CDBC, CPDT, KPACTP

Question: I have a new puppy that I want to socialize, but I'm not really sure what that means, or how to go about it. Can you give me some ideas on the best way to do this?

Signed;

New puppy mom

Dear Mom,

That is such a good question, and it sometimes seems as though there are as many answers as there are puppies, so I will try to narrow it down to just a few of the most important ones.

Dr. Ian Dunbar, a renowned leader in dog behavior, and author of "Before and after you Get Your Puppy," firmly believes that puppies should meet at least 100 new people each month before the puppy reaches 4-months-old. John Rodgerson one of England's premier Behavior Trainers holds classes where families exchange puppies every few days to socialize them into new homes and environments. Kay Lawrence a puppy specialist in Britain insists that a puppy's environment should change daily by adding one new item, texture or sound just after the puppy first enters the world!

All of these socialization ideas have sound, scientific merit, however, in our busy, hectic world; many people feel that those goals are daunting and impossible when it comes to their own puppy. Many pet parents feel like some socialization is better than none, and in many ways they are right. It's far better to have limited positive experiences with the world, in general, than to rush through trying to get it all in and possibly overtaxing or frightening your puppy.

Realizing that time is precious, but socialization critical to a well-rounded puppy, a compromise might be needed for some families. The following is a Puppy Socialization Menu that will allow you to pick a "full-course meal" or to order "ala carte" according to your schedule and life style. Which ever way you "order," any effort you put into socializing your puppy will help him or her learn that new things in her life are really no big deal if you use positive methods to make the process fun! Do as much as you can, and enrich your puppy's environment daily to help your puppy become comfortable with living in "our" world.

Write down your daily choices for each category and feel free to add your own!

SURFACES

Sidewalks, grass, water, snow, dirt, stairs up or down, tile or hard wood floors, sand, car floor or seats, tin foil

MOVING THINGS

Skateboards, bikes, Pedi-cabs, ballgame, tennis, dog sports, boats, dog parks, buses, trolley, trains, motorcycles, lawn mover, vacuum cleaner, musical instruments, kids running and yelling

PEOPLE

Children of different ages, people jogging, crowds, people on crutches, people in wheelchairs, older people with canes or walkers, people with hats, delivery people, people on skates or rollerblades, people pushing carts or carriages

SOUNDS

People laughing, trash trucks, dogs barking, fireworks, horns, doorbell, sirens, car alarms, hair dryer, vacuum cleaner, dropped objects, wind chimes, answering machine, squeaky toys, alarm clock

ROAD TRIPS

Coffee café, beach, doggie park, other people's homes, doggie day care, groomer, vet office (just to visit, not get for an appointment), agility field, walking in the rain, car ride, outdoor mall, picnic, playground, mirrors, escalator, elevator, construction areas

Once you have decided what to add to enrich your puppy's life, you will next want to be pro-active in socializing him or her daily.

As you add socialization training to your puppy's world it's important to remember your puppy should never be forced or pushed into any interaction, whether it is with people, sounds or objects. As a gauge, your puppy should look like he or she is having fun, and should always be allowed to approach new people or objects slowly and with lots of encouragement and treats from you.

This also means telling people, "No," if your puppy seems uneasy or worried. One bad encounter can set your dog up for fearful or aggressive behaviors that are difficult to overcome for many dogs. It's also important to respect your puppy's personal space and not allow people or children to bother him or her when she is in her crate, or sleeping. These rude encounters will quickly teach your puppy to avoid people or never bother to rest when there are people present.

Be pro-active and use food treats to make a positive association with new and novel things your puppy is exploring. Any time there is a noise or movement that is new to your puppy, give her the feedback that all is well— drop a treat or say, "Good dog," so she learns that new things equal rewards!

Finally, when adding a puppy class, be sure to sit in a variety of classes before committing your "baby" to a class that might not be sensitive to your puppy's needs, or might even be scary or intimidating to your puppy. Look at the other puppies in the class—are they happy, having fun and look like your vision of puppies having a good time? If not, move on and find a class that will help your puppy, not intimidate or scare him or her. For more help in choosing a trainer, please visit the Association of Pet Dog Trainers at www.apdt.com for their recommendations.