



Socialization

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A word we hear all the time in our lives as pet parents but a concept that is far more complex than we may realize. Let's start with the most basic concept of socialization. Socialization is the process of learning how to behave and interact in the world we live in.

While socialization is a life-long process, there is an age window during which puppies are most receptive to experiences. This window begins and ends early! It closes at approximately 4 to 6 months of age, depending on your puppy's breed and temperament. Comparative learning begins after that age. Comparative learning is when puppies are comparing their new experiences to their previous experiences. Before that age, they have no experiences to compare it to so everything is just incorporated through their temperament. (Their genetic personality.)

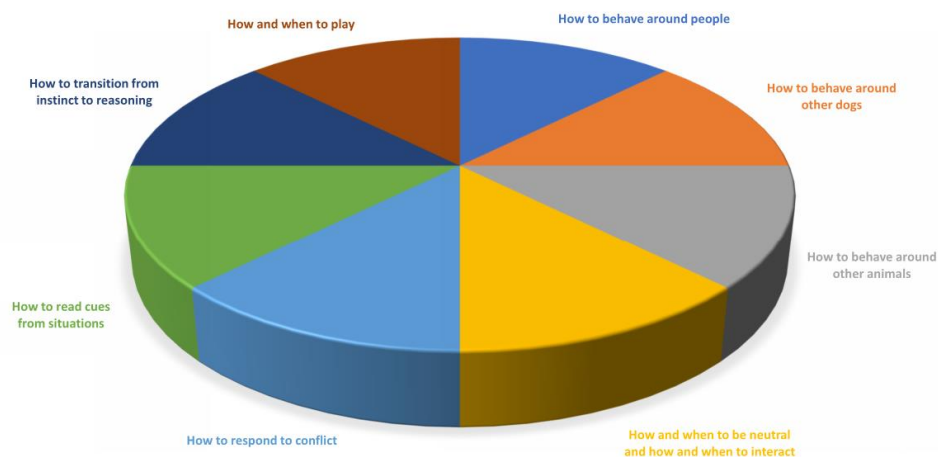
During this ideal socialization window, it is imperative that our puppies have positive experiences. Sadly, people often think socialization is merely about providing experiences with no emphasis on how the puppy feels about those experiences. Puppies are taken to puppy classes, dog parks, exposed to friend's dogs, etc. If we don't ensure that these experiences are positive, we will be simply allowing our puppies to learn on their own from those experiences. This often means that puppies must adapt their behavior in order to keep up with everything that is happening to them. If another puppy or dog plays too roughly, your puppy may become defensive and learn to use aggression when he doesn't know what else to do. Since no human intervened to mitigate the puppy's experience, it was all up to the puppy to figure it out and handle it. Could we imagine allowing toddlers to play together without guiding their interaction and simply allowing them to "work through" it? Dog to dog interaction must be guided. We must advocate for our puppies.

What about people who think your puppy is the cutest thing ever? Your puppy is picked up, kissed, cooed at, petted. What if your puppy is a little timid or shy? Do you think this sort of experience will make him feel comforted or overwhelmed? Do you think simply exposing him to this sort of interaction will make him like it? Exposure to things puppies don't like or feel comfortable with often causes problems. Since repeated experiences generally won't make him like it more, he then becomes more avoidant. As he begins to go through his developmental periods, he may begin to bark or maybe snap, etc. The puppy adapted his behavior to use aggression to make the thing he didn't like stop or to have control over the thing he didn't like. A better choice would be to attempt to get the puppy to WANT interaction by going slowly and only engaging when the puppy is curious. People can also try to encourage interaction by giving treats the puppy likes, or toys the puppy wants to play with interactively. This will make him more comfortable when interacting with people and teach him that people are valuable and positive.

Let's look at the formal definition of socialization and social behavior:

Socialization is the process of learning to behave in a way that is acceptable to society. Social behavior is about living in communities with others. Most people think socialization is about playing with other dogs and meeting all sorts of people. While those are some of the many elements of what socialization is, it is not the full picture at all.

Here are all the broad elements of what socialization includes with dogs:



- **How to behave around people.** (Family, friends, strangers, workers, vets, groomers, children, in the home, in public, etc.)
- **How to behave around other dogs.** (Friends, familiar dogs, unfamiliar dogs, on leash, off leash, etc.)
- **How to behave around other animals.** (Cats, small animals, animals in the house, animals in the environment, etc.)
- **How and when to be neutral – how and when to interact.** (People, dogs, animal, environment, etc.)
- **How to respond to conflict.**
- **How to read cues from situations.**
- **How to transition from instinct to reasoning.**
- **How and when to play.** (People, familiar dogs, unfamiliar dogs, aggressive dogs, neutral dogs, children, other animals, etc.)

It is important to socialize our dogs and guide their behavior for the world in which they will be living. The more experiences they have in which they learn how to behave, the better. Think about the world in which your puppy will be living. Will he go for walks? Will he be taken to public places? Will he be exposed to strangers entering his home? What about veterinarians and groomers? Will he be exposed to other dogs? What about cats and other small animals? Will he ever encounter children? Will he travel with you? What are your expectations of his behavior? How are you guiding him to have the skills necessary to be in those situations? These are just a few of the questions you should ask when you are preparing to socialize your puppy.

What about adult dogs? Are they still capable of socialization? Yes, but it is different for them. If your adult dog does not like other dogs, you cannot simply enroll him in a dog day care for exposure and expect that he will be properly socializing. Will exposure alone change these dog's preferences? These dogs often need systematic, guided socialization because they are later in their development. Their current experiences are being compared to their previous experiences (i.e., comparative learning). If their previous experiences were absent, limited, or negative - the new experiences need to be something THE DOG interprets as positive. It isn't enough for US HUMANS to think the experiences should be positive to our dog. Often, after that ideal socialization window has occurred and maturation has settled in, preferences are hard to change. While socialization is a life-long, fluid process - big changes are not likely. As dog's mature, we are only able to move that "preference needle" a little to one side or the other. We are not likely to make drastic changes to their likes and dislikes.

Socialization is a life-long process because puppies, like humans, go through various developmental periods throughout their life.

- When we are very young, we are experiencing things for the first time.
- As we mature, we compare our current experiences to our previous experiences.
- As we become socially mature, we begin to take control of our experiences based on our learning as to how we were affected by those experiences.
- As adults, we begin to discern what we can and should control with what isn't worth our energy as well as how to control those things.
- As we become mature adults, we are more settled in our personalities and tend to be more reasoned in our thinking and new experiences occur less often. (Been there, done that.) However, with the wisdom of life, new experiences can be easier to incorporate. The more extensive our socialization, the easier it is to incorporate new experiences. The more limited our socialization, the less likely we will have the skills to adapt.

Socialization is an over-used, very misunderstood term. It is a very broad concept about how your dog behaves in the world he lives in. Like children, dogs need to be guided in their experiences. Our pets are lucky enough to have human families to advocate for them. Unlike their ancestors, pets don't have to worry about how to get food and how to escape death. The more we teach, train, guide, and advocate our dogs, the more they

learn to rely upon us and the easier it becomes to work with them during new experiences at any point in their life. The more reliant they are upon themselves to learn from their experiences, the cleverer and more adaptive they become and the less reliant they are upon their human families and people in general. This will cause challenges as these more self-reliant dogs are exposed to our ever-changing world. Self-reliant dogs often use more primal or “animal” ways to resolve conflict through fight or flight defense drives. More socialized and human-reliant dogs are more likely to look to the humans to help them when in conflict and that makes change a little easier for everyone!