

On-Going Socialization is the Name of the Game

Opportunity Barks Behavior & Training

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As a behavior counselor and dog trainer, I often see young pups that have missed the boat on early socialization or adults that are trying to "get socialized" later in life. In many cases, socialization is mistakenly considered to be something that you do when you first bring your dog home and that's it. Consider that one of the keys to having a behaviorally healthy dog is their ongoing exposure and positive experiences with the world around them.

What is Socialization?

Socialization is defined as your dog's exposure to new people, places, animals, noises, vehicles, etc. A common pitfall of socialization is the belief that a dog *is* socialized if the dog is great with people and dogs as a youngster or gets along well with your family or the neighbor's dog. In fact, what you have is a dog that may be great as a pup, which doesn't guarantee that the dog will be the same as an adult. Or, you may have a dog that is well socialized to a couple of dogs and people but that doesn't mean that the dog will be as comfortable or friendly with strange dogs and people. The dog you have at 8 weeks, 8 months and 8 years is not the same dog you had even a month ago. So when do you start socializing your dog?

Young Pups...

Socialization begins the moment your dog is born. For puppies, the critical period of socialization is the first 12 weeks of the pup's life. This is a limited window for guardians to introduce their pup to other friendly pups; people of all ages and appearances; and places in the real world. According to Animal Behaviorist, Dr. Ian Dunbar, "Your puppy needs to meet at least one hundred people in the first three months of their life." Others may argue that your pup shouldn't be outside or around other dogs until the dog is 4 months old and fully vaccinated. Though pups are highly susceptible to distemper or parvovirus before having received their adult shots, their behavioral health is as important as their physical health.

Dogs who are too sheltered as puppies, even though it may be "for their own good", often develop fear, anxiety and aggression issues. According to R. K. Anderson DVM, Diplomate American College of Veterinary Preventive Medicine, "The risk of a dog dying because of infection with distemper or parvo disease is far less than the much higher risk of a dog dying (euthanasia) because of a behavior problem." Maximize your dog's exposure to the world, while minimizing their exposure to disease.

Continued Socialization...

Whether you have a pup or an adult dog, your dog's behavior is never set in stone. Hormone levels fluctuate during adolescence, and as your dog continues to grow and develop, their interactions with the world will change. It's important to continue to make new dogs, people and places as positive as possible.

Here are a few easy things that you can continue to do to maintain your dog's sociability:

- Take your dog on daily walks and say "good" and treat when your dog sees another dog or person, even if your dog seems fine with them.
- Don't force interactions with people and dogs. If your dog is uncomfortable, listen to your dog. Let them proceed at their own pace. Don't force them to play or restrain them to accept petting from children or strangers.
- Allow your dog to initiate contact with people and reward the dog when he/she does.
- Don't reprimand or reward your dog if they bark or show fear toward a dog or person (this only reinforces fear and makes it doubly negative for your dog).

- If your dog is dog friendly, continue off-leash play in fenced areas with different, appropriate dogs a few times a week. But don't expect every dog owner to be as responsible as you are—keep your eyes peeled for challenging situations.

Whether you have a pup or an adult dog, the important lesson is that socialization does not end at puppy hood. In fact, it's your dog's ongoing exposure to new dogs, people and places on their daily life that has them continue to be well-adjusted companions. As spring approaches, enjoy the outdoors with your best friend and introduce them to a new thing or two.

Leigh Siegfried is a Behavior Counselor and Trainer with Opportunity Barks, offering private lessons, behavior consultations, group classes and workshops in Northern Virginia, DC and Philly Metro areas. Have a training question or want more information? Visit www.opbarks.com or call 888-OPBARKS.