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Socializing Your New Puppy

Little puppies don't come into our world with ready knowledge about humans or the world in which we live. They need to learn all about car rides, vacuum sweepers, weaving bicycles, and more. If they don't have a chance to learn about the people, animals, and things in their environment, they may grow up to be fearful, anxious, antisocial adults.

The first few months of your puppy's life are the most critical for its development. The socialization process should begin as soon as you get the new puppy. Start with simple, quiet, one-person introductions, and gradually include more people in noisier situations. Invite friends, relatives, and their pets to come to the home to meet, greet, and play with the pup. As soon as your veterinarian says your puppy is adequately vaccinated, take it on as many walks and outings as possible. Avoid situations that might be high risk for disease such as neighborhood parks or areas with stray dogs. To make the new introductions special, give a small biscuit to the puppy whenever it meets a new friend. If your puppy seems exceptionally cautious when introduced to situations or stimuli, start off with mild exposure, and give food rewards for nonfearful responses.

And it's important that your puppy meets a variety of people of all ages and appearances. A puppy that grows up in a restricted social group (e.g. all adults or all females) may show fear and aggression when later exposed to people who appear or act significantly different (e.g. children, men with beards).

Another excellent way to promote early socialization is to take your puppy to training classes. Ask your veterinarian about classes available in your area. Punishment during the early development stages can impact good people skills. Avoid training methods that involve physical discipline, such as swatting the pup, thumping it on the nose, or rubbing its face in a mess.

It's also important to get your puppy used to having all parts of the body touched. Dogs who are not properly socialized may become aggressive when their ears, feet, or mouths are touched. Starting from the time you get your puppy, you need to take time every day to practice opening the mouth (so you can brush the teeth), look in the ears (so you can clean the ears), and hold and manipulate the legs and paws (so you can trim the nails). Not only will this make things easier for you, but your veterinarian and their staff will greatly appreciate it too! Also during this gentling time, take a minute to hold your puppy still. If they start to struggle, hold on tighter. When they relax, ease up and praise them.

Properly socializing and shaping your puppy's temperament requires an investment in time. You will find that your efforts are well worthwhile when you become the proud parent of a social, friendly dog.

—Wayne L. Hunthausen, DVM, and Gary M. Landsberg, DVM