

PUPPY SOCIALIZATION AND EARLY EXPOSURE

Steps for Socialization and Early Exposure

Appropriate socialization is critical for puppies during the sensitive period (between 3-12 weeks of age) to ensure a friendly and social adult dog and to prevent behavior problems related to fear. This is also the ideal time to provide pups with gentle exposure to habituate them to sounds, sights, surfaces, and situations that they are likely to experience in their adult living environments. The goal during this time is that the puppy has a variety of social interactions and new experiences that are positive, not neutral or bad. This is accomplished by watching the pup's body language and giving highly valued treats.

Puppies must be socialized to people who are unfamiliar to them. This might include people known to the caretakers who the puppies have not yet met. **Note: Careful biosecurity precautions must be undertaken when introducing the puppies to new people, dogs, and objects. This includes sanitization of surfaces and objects, fresh clothing, and foot baths.** All dogs that interact with the puppies must be healthy, vaccinated, and behaviorally appropriate (e.g. friendly).

Use our Puppy Socialization and Exposure Checklist to guide you in this process.

1. Identify and gather treats/food the puppy will readily eat. Very young pups may only be able to lick something such as meat flavored baby food from a finger.
2. Begin in the whelping area with the added social support of the litter and mother. Expose the puppy to caretakers, as well as new surfaces and objects.



Puppies exposed to children during the sensitive period between 3-12 weeks of age show a greater affinity to children than those exposed to children after this period (Arai et al., 2011).



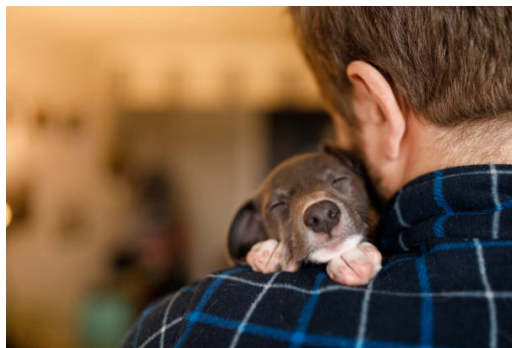
3. Let the puppy explore and engage as they feel comfortable and able.
4. Offer pups high value treats. **Note: The puppy does not need to earn these by behaving in a certain way, they are simply building the association that new humans, objects, surfaces, and situations are good.**
5. Monitor the pup's behavior and body language for comfort.
6. If the puppy is comfortable, you can slightly increase the duration or level of interaction. If you notice that the puppy is uncomfortable, go back to where they were comfortable. **Note: If the puppy's comfort during socialization sessions is not improving or is becoming more fearful, stop and consult your veterinarian.**
7. Keep the interactions short (e.g. may be as short as seconds to minutes, age dependent) and positive (monitor pup's willingness to continue the interaction!)
8. Always aim to end sessions on a positive note unless safety or welfare of those involved inhibits this. You want the puppy to leave wanting more!
9. Begin your next session one step behind where the pup was last successful.

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10. Expand to new areas by taking the litter to a new space where they are relaxed and comfortable, first with their mother and then with the litter on their own.
11. Begin to incorporate new people, puppies, and dogs (provide visual access if direct contact is not safe) while continuing exposure to additional objects, surfaces, and situations.
12. Utilize as many different locations for socialization and early exposure as possible.

Quick Tips

- New people only need to be unfamiliar to the pups. Enlist family members that don't work in the kennel and visiting friends as "strangers." Caretakers can also change their appearance with the addition of boots, hats, coats, walker, wheelchair, or walking with a limp or using a cane.
- Puppy brains are primed to learn what is safe or unsafe quickly during this period. Avoid traumatic experiences as they can create lifelong fears.
- The ideal time to start socializing puppies is prior to the beginning of the fear period. This is when pups avoid scary things or show "hazard avoidance." Additional care must be taken to ensure good experiences once puppies have entered the fear period.
- On average the fear period begins at 8 weeks of age, but varies by individual. Breed differences, such as German Shepherds starting the fear period earlier and Labrador Retrievers later, have been documented.
- Pups may show changes in their previous comfort level once the fear period begins and protocols should be adjusted when needed.
- It is critical to socialize pups in many locations before 6-7 weeks of age to avoid creating a puppy that is only comfortable within their whelping area.
- During early "real life" experiences that may be painful or scary (e.g. bathing, vaccinating etc.) feed throughout the entire event to prevent setbacks. Smearing sticky palatable



food (e.g. chicken baby food, gruel of canned dog food, spray cheese, braunschweiger) on the kennel or tub wall, exam table, or on a commercially available product for this purpose (e.g. Lickimat, Bath Buddy) is a practical, handsfree option that meters out the food required for longer interactions.

- Incorporate body handling into puppy behavioral wellness programs. The ideal time to teach body handling is prior to the development of any negative associations and between 3 and 12 weeks of age. Progress with adults and fearful individuals often takes longer and requires slower exposure.
- For "hold back pups" (e.g. pups raised in a kennel for future breeding, or purchased as pups for the same purpose), continue focused socialization and early exposure opportunities through 16 weeks of age. Maintenance of socialization is also required. Social exposure and positive interactions must continue until at least 6-8 months of age, and ideally over a lifetime.
- Provide educational information on the importance of socialization practices to new puppy owners. Include a copy of the checklist in the records that accompany pups to their new home. New owners can see what has already been accomplished and where more work may be needed to continue socializing their puppy effectively.



More socialization during puppyhood leads to improved social behavior towards humans and other dogs in adulthood (Appleby et al., 2002; Schilder et al., 2019).

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