

Early Exposure for Puppies

What is early exposure?

Early exposure is similar to how we socialize puppies with humans and other dogs/animals. In this case, we give puppies exposure to sounds, sights, surfaces, and situations. We focus on things they are likely to experience in their adult living environments.

Early exposure means brief, positive interactions with a variety of objects and experiences when puppies are between 3-14 weeks of age.



- Expose puppies to a range of sounds, textures, smells, and locations. (Learn more in our **Puppy Socialization Handout**)
- Introduce puppies to things they may experience later in life. Most puppies will experience things like crate confinement, grooming, and leash walking.

Do you have puppies that you will hold back for breeding? Prepare them for living in both a kennel and a home environment after retirement and re-homing.

Why do puppies need early exposure?

Exposing puppies to a variety of experiences and objects helps them to accept novelty without fear later in life.

Chronic fear reduces a dog's quality of life and can be stressful for their human companions.

When should early exposure occur?

During the "sensitive period," (3-14 weeks) puppies learn quickly about the world. Puppies make life-long associations between things in their environment and good or bad outcomes.

All dogs benefit from new experiences! Continue positive exposures beyond the sensitive period.



Note: Between approximately 8-10 weeks of age, puppies experience a **fear period**. During the fear period, puppies may show discomfort or avoidance of novelty. Carefully manage exposures at this time. Negative experiences can lead to fearful behavior in adulthood.

How to provide early exposure for your puppies

- Exposures must be short, gradual, positive, frequent, and varied. Novel experiences that are too intense can increase fear.
- Watch puppy body language to ensure they are comfortable (See our handout **Canine Body Language**).
- Offer delicious food when exposing a puppy to a new experience.
- The puppy must be able to approach and move away as they choose.



Enhance the whelping area

At three weeks of age, start exposing puppies to a variety of new items (such as toys that make noise), sounds, or scents. This helps increase their comfort with new experiences. Move to additional locations when the puppies are older.

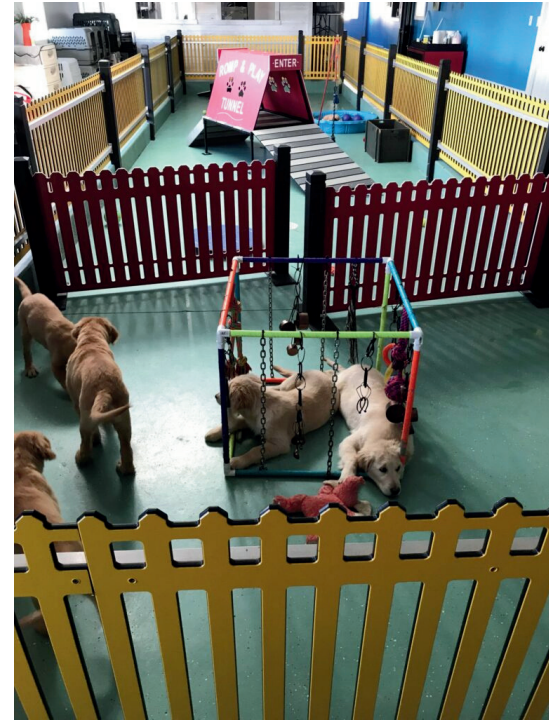
- Rotate items regularly.
- Vary how long items stay in the whelping area.

Starting at five weeks of age, give puppies safe experiences in outdoor and indoor environments away from the whelping area.

- Offer opportunities in as many different areas of the facility as possible!
- Include items in the playpens such as steps, grass, balance boards, bridges, ramps, crates, and larger toys.

Prevent fear

- Keep events such as vaccinations, grooming, and transportation as positive as possible.
- Offer treats. Try canned dog food, spray cheese, or Braunschweiger (liverwurst) on the kennel or tub wall, or exam table. There are hands-free products that slow down feeding such as a Lickimat or Bath Buddy.
- Break down stressful experiences into smaller parts.



Example: Exposing a puppy to a vacuum cleaner

1. **First expose a puppy to the vacuum when it is turned off. Offer treats. When the puppy is comfortable here, move to step 2.**
2. **Turn on the vacuum in another room, with a closed door between it and the puppy. Offer treats. When the puppy is comfortable here, move to step 3.**
3. **Turn on the vacuum in another room, with no closed door between it and the puppy. Offer treats. When the puppy is comfortable here, move to step 4.**
4. **Turn on the vacuum in the same room as the puppy for brief periods. Offer treats. Gradually increase the time the puppy is exposed to the vacuum.**

In exercises like this, the puppy should always show relaxed, positive body language and continue to eat treats. If not, go back to the previous step where they were comfortable.

More tips for early exposures!

- Go slow. Experiences must be positive (not neutral or bad). Watch the puppy's behavior and body language. If the puppy is comfortable, increase the duration or level of exposure a small amount.
- If the puppy remains fearful, stop and consult your veterinarian or a behaviorist.
- Vary location. If a puppy only experiences new things in the whelping area, they may view anything new outside of that area as scary.
- Work on one challenge at a time. Exposing a puppy to many things at once is too much!