

## What is socialization?

Socialization is the process of safely introducing a puppy to people and other animals.

## Why do puppies need socialization?

Socialization helps puppies learn how to interact with humans and other animals. Puppies with limited socialization may show fearfulness, anxiety or other undesirable behavior.



## When should socialization happen?

The “sensitive period” for socialization occurs from 3-14 weeks of age.

During this influential period, puppies:

- learn quickly about the world
- make life-long associations between experiences and good or bad outcomes
- show a willingness to approach and interact with people
- learn important social behaviors from littermates and mom

Although socialization must start early, it is a life-long process.

**Experiences must be safe, gentle, gradual, and positive – neutral is not good enough!**

**Watch body language to be sure that puppies are having a positive experience.**

**See our handout: Canine Body Language for more!**

## How to socialize your puppies

- Provide moms with space to get away from the puppies during weaning. This reduces the risk of aggressive interactions.
- Keep puppies with littermates until at least eight weeks of age.
- Expose puppies to new people (such as family and friends) between 3-8 weeks of age.
- Familiar caretakers can appear as “strangers” by carrying an umbrella or wearing a large coat, different hats, or new shoes.
- Have visitors hand out small treats to dogs as they pass through the kennel. If puppies are comfortable, include gentle stroking.
- Expose puppies to healthy puppies from other litters in the same kennel.
- Expose puppies to unfamiliar, puppy-friendly adult dogs. Any dogs your puppy meets should be healthy and fully vaccinated.
- Provide play sessions with litters of different breeds of similar age and developmental stage. This promotes positive social behavior toward a variety of dogs in adulthood.



**GOALS:**  
**Frequent, short,**  
**incremental**  
**interactions that**  
**leave the puppy**  
**happy and**  
**wanting more!**

### What is a fear period in puppies?

Puppies experience a fear period during the socialization window. During this time, puppies are more sensitive to negative experiences. These experiences can impact adult dog behavior. Manage interactions to keep them positive.

### When does it occur?

On average, the fear period in dogs occurs between 8-10 weeks of age. Individual and breed differences can impact this timeline. Watch the behavior of puppies for indications that the fear period has begun.



**Make sure puppies have positive experiences with transport, grooming, handling, veterinary care, and transitions to new homes. A single negative event can create lifelong fears!**

### Safety considerations

Although 3-14 week old puppies are not fully protected through vaccination, it is important to socialize them. The benefits of safe socialization far outweigh the risk of illness.

- If attending a puppy class, be sure up-to-date vaccinations are required for all participants.
- Have visitors wear fresh clothes and use shoe covers before engaging with the puppies.
- Sanitize socialization areas before and after use.



**Pairing experiences with delicious food increases the chance that interactions are positive. See our handout Quick Tips for Success: Puppy Socialization and Early Exposure**

### More tips for socialization success!

**More is not always better.** Increasing exposure when a puppy is showing fear or discomfort can be harmful. The puppy's brain is primed to rapidly learn what is safe and what is unsafe.

**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 is uncomfortable, go back to where they were comfortable. If the puppy remains uncomfortable or fearful, stop and consult your veterinarian or a behaviorist.

**Socialize puppies in several locations.** Variety is needed for a puppy to generalize their learning. If a puppy only experiences new people in the whelping area or kennel, they may view people outside of that area as scary.

**Different breeds and individuals develop at different rates.** Use behavior, not age, to determine where a puppy is developmentally and when the fear period has begun. An increase in fear behavior and less exploration mark the start of the fear period.