

A close-up photograph of a small, fluffy puppy with white fur and brown patches on its ears and face. The puppy is lying down in a field of vibrant green grass, with its eyes closed in a peaceful state. The background is softly blurred, showing more green grass and a few yellow wildflowers.

Puppy Socialization and Early Exposure

Croney Research Group



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Socialization is:

Frequent, brief, positive interactions that young puppies have with
humans, dogs, other animals

A small, fluffy brown puppy is standing on a wooden deck. The deck is covered with a thin layer of snow. The puppy is looking down at the snow. In the background, there is a blurred image of a house with a yellow light on.

Early Exposure is:

Frequent, brief, positive interactions that young puppies have with:

objects, textures, sounds,
situations, locations

Socialization & Early Exposure

- Build lifelong confidence and skills when facing new dogs, people, places, surfaces, objects, and more!
- Reduces the risk of developing undesirable behaviors
- Supports improved well-being in adulthood



IMPORTANT



**Socialization and early exposure is most effective when puppies are
3 to ~12-14 weeks of age**

What puppies learn about now will
impact how they behave in adulthood!

Teach puppies to not be afraid of
people, places, and things that they
will encounter as adults

Socialization and Early Exposure must Start with YOU

- Socialize all puppies between 3 to ~12-14 weeks of age
- Do not wait until just before re-homing, important for “hold-back girls” too
- Track your progress
- Educate new pet families on how to continue the process
- Use the Checklist: Puppy Socialization and Early Exposure

Six Steps towards Socialization Success

#1: Be on Time

Experiences occurring between 3 to ~12-14 weeks of age have the biggest impact on later behavior

#2: Be Positive

Give high value treats to the puppy during the interactions. The puppy does not need to earn these! Watch body language to make sure they are having a good time.



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#3: Be Gentle

Go slow. Start with “easy” exposures that are less overwhelming and work up to the louder, slipperier, wilder experiences. Allow pups to choose to participate. They will do so when they feel safe.

#4: Be Safe

Introduce puppies to healthy, friendly, vaccinated animals, objects that have been cleaned and disinfected, and people following good biosecurity practices. Ensure your pups are up to date on vaccinations

#5: Be Complex

Exposure should include many different people, locations, sounds, surfaces, and objects. Expose puppies to what they will encounter as adults in the kennel or homes after retirement.



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#6: Be Consistent

Provide frequent, brief experiences throughout the 3 to 12-14 week window, and beyond!

How To: Socializing with Other Animals

Positive experiences with a variety of dogs, puppies, and others who differ in:

- Species
- Size
- Breed
- Sex
- Age
- Color
- Play style
- Temperament

How To: Socializing with People

Positive experiences with a variety of people who differ in:

Attributes –

- Height
- Ethnicity
- Age
- Known/strangers
- Canes/crutches
- Wheelchairs

Clothing/Accessories –

- Boots
- Glasses
- Hats



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How To: Seven Ss of Early Exposure

A variety of positive sensory experiences:

1. **Surfaces** (gravel, sand, concrete, grass, water)
2. **Sounds** (storms, children, crowds, traffic, fireworks)*
3. **Smells** (foods, essential oils)
4. **Sights** (moving objects)
5. **Scenarios** (veterinary, travel, play)
6. **Spaces** (home pen, exercise pen, office, crate)
7. **Structures** (ramps, platforms, steps)

*Hint: use
a recording
and start
at a low
volume!

Application Examples

- Dress in different clothing and accessories to appear different to the puppies
- Invite people you know who are new to the puppies to come for a visit (for example family or friends who don't work in the kennel)
- Regularly switch out toys and furniture items in the outdoor and indoor pens
- Create obstacle courses in the exercise pens with varied climbing structures and surfaces to experience



Things to Avoid:

Too much/too scary (loud blasting of fireworks AND lots of people)

Too fast (jumping right from greeting to being handled)


Too long (more than a few minutes and puppy gets tired and disinterested)

Too unsafe (play groups with unknown adult dogs)



FAQ #1: It is safe to socialize puppies when they are not yet fully vaccinated

- Do not wait for full vaccination! Efforts to build positive associations after this time will be harder and less effective!
- Minimize risks by socializing in known, clean environments with vaccinated, healthy, behaviorally appropriate (puppy-friendly) dogs
- Follow careful biosecurity precautions including sanitization of surfaces and objects, clean clothing, and foot baths
- Follow your veterinarian's guidelines and ensure puppies are current on vaccinations



FAQ #2: More socialization and early exposure is not always better

- For success, experiences must be perceived by the puppy as positive, not neutral or negative
- One bad experience can lead to lifelong fear.
- Experiencing more *positive* experiences *is* often better!



FAQ #3: Continue to provide positive exposures to people, dogs, places, and things past 12-14 weeks of age

Positive interactions throughout a dog's life:

- Are still beneficial
- Are essential to maintain confidence and social skills
- Help to address fear-related behavior
- Are less effective than during the sensitive period, will take longer and impact behavior with more difficulty



To Learn More:

- [Basics of Socialization](#)
- [Quick Tips for Success: Puppy Socialization and Early Exposure](#)
- [Checklist: Puppy Socialization and Early Exposure](#)



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