

How to Socialize Your Puppy

Puppies need handling from day one

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Puppies go through a critical period of socialization between eight and 16 weeks of age. During this period of time they mature very rapidly. If isolated from external stimuli and not exposed to the outside world, they can grow up to be fearful adult dogs.

Litters of puppies raised in an isolated location such as a barn, a garage or an isolated dog kennel often have little exposure to humans except those feeding them. If puppies never leave their confined, isolated quarters where they have been raised, they may never experience any external stimuli such as automobiles, strangers, loud noises or children running and playing.

Poorly socialized puppies can also result when they have been raised in the wild by an abandoned, female dog. If these puppies are fortunate enough to be discovered by a human and receive handling while still very young, they have a better chance to trust humans and be less fearful. If they receive no human handling before they are 16 weeks of age, they may grow up to be very fearful adult dogs that are not acceptable family pets.

If puppies are not socialized at an early enough age, it makes little difference if they have been raised by a breeder, a private family or in a vacant building; the outcome will usually be the same. Puppies that receive little or no human handling between the ages of eight and 16 weeks of age often remain fearful when exposed to new situations. Meeting their new family for the first time, the car ride to their new home, their first trip to the vet, and meeting children, strangers or other dogs for the first time can be extremely frightening for these puppies.

We will never be able to affect puppies raised in the wild by an abandoned dog or by breeders who don't know how important it is to socialize their puppies. What we can do is not allow our emotions to override good, rational thinking when making a decision about which puppy will make the best family pet. If you feel sorry for and want to select the shy puppy that avoids eye contact and doesn't want to be picked up, you may be setting yourself up for future problems.

How can we make sure the puppy we purchase will be well-socialized and become a good fit for our family? When surveying a puppy or litter of puppies more than 16 weeks of age that have had little human handling and are very shy and fearful, realize that they may always remain somewhat shy and fearful. If handled with kindness, patience and love, some of these puppies may learn to trust their family members but still remain somewhat fearful of strangers. A puppy acquired at eight weeks of age is more likely to become a well-adjusted family pet than one adopted at 16 weeks of age.

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Acquiring a puppy prior to eight weeks of age can also create problems. These puppies miss out on important interactions that take place with other puppies in the litter. A puppy selected too young may miss out on the consequences of biting a littermate too hard. This puppy's new owners will then pay the price when it bites them too hard while playing.

Eight weeks of age is the ideal time for a puppy to adjust to a new home.

How do we get our puppies socialized so they grow up to be well-adjusted, adult dogs that are comfortable meeting strangers, children and other dogs? The key is to make sure your puppy gets exposed to everything he may ever be exposed to during his lifetime, while he is very young. The critical age of socialization is between eight and 16 weeks of age. If not exposed to new situations during this critical period, your puppy may always be fearful when exposed to new things in the future.

After you have chosen your new puppy and had it examined by your veterinarian, you can begin to expose it to new things. Your puppy will not have had all his vaccinations yet, but you may still take him to a family or neighbor's home to expose him to children or friendly, vaccinated dogs. If you have small children, dogs or cats in your family, you are fortunate. Your puppy will become accustomed to the screaming and active play behavior of children and will be exposed to other pets.

If you are a single adult, a couple without children or a senior citizen, you will have to go out of your way to expose your puppy to children of all ages. You can invite well-mannered children into your home to have supervised play with your new puppy. If you don't know anyone with small children, you can often find families with children at local parks. Keep some tasty treats available for the children to give your puppy so he associates them with food rewards.

When you have visitors come to your home, when the mailman delivers mail or the deliveryman brings packages, do the same thing. Give them a dog treat, have them make your puppy sit, and then give the puppy the treat for sitting. This will teach the puppy if he sits for strangers he will be rewarded. This is an excellent way to prevent your puppy from jumping up on people. Your puppy will also learn that visitors will come bearing gifts, instead of being something to bark at and to protect the family from.

Enrolling your puppy in a puppy kindergarten or a puppy training class will have many benefits. This will be a way to take your puppy out of the house once a week where he will be exposed to many new situations during a critical period of socialization. Be sure to choose a puppy training class where the emphasis is on having fun and meeting new puppies and their owners. Instructors should use only a buckle-type collar and never a choker or pinch collar. Basic training using praise and food rewards for motivation will make you and your puppy enjoy going to class.

Choosing the correct puppy for you and your family that fits your particular life-style is critical. Exposing your new puppy to pleasant experiences such as strangers, children and other dogs between eight and 16 weeks of age, is critical to having a well-adjusted adult dog.