



SOCIALIZING YOUR PUPPY

Many people believe that the socialization period in dogs is much longer than it actually is. This period lasts from 4 to 15 weeks of age. After 15 weeks of age, habituation to novel items is possible, but it becomes more difficult and is a much longer process. The important part about socialization isn't the quantity, but the **QUALITY** of interactions. All novel items should be presented as a positive experience for the puppy. Allow the puppy to approach at his own speed and have plenty of high-quality treats to give him. This associates new items with food, which is a positive experience for most puppies.

Try not to let strangers approach your puppy and pet him. Instead, have unfamiliar people feed your puppy treats to foster a positive association. Work with people that are wearing different types of clothing such as hoods, hats, boots, and long skirts. Try to have people of different sizes, body types, and skin colors feed your puppy. Again, allow the puppy to approach the people at his own pace. If he will not approach, have people toss treats to him.

If your puppy will not take food, then the situation is likely too overwhelming for them. Try to get the puppy out of that situation. For smaller puppies that may mean picking them up (if that is something they are comfortable with). For larger puppies (or for small dogs that dislike being picked up) it may mean walking away from the source of their fear. Try to use treats to distract the puppy, rather than dragging them away on the leash.

It would also be beneficial to work on handling with your puppy. This will make veterinary visits less stressful in the future. Start by waving your hands around your puppy's face, mark and give a treat (see Marker Training handout). Do this for several sessions. Then touch the puppy on the top of the head (which many dogs don't like), mark, and reward. Gradually work on touching the ear, lifting the ear, and gently touching the opening. Do not progress to the next level of difficulty until the puppy appears comfortable with this level. You can do the same for the rump, feet, and belly in gradual steps.

You can also work on giving your puppy medication. Twice a day give your puppy 3-4 soft treats in a row. Make sure that the treats are large enough to hide a pill, should the need arise. If you ever need to give a pill, then put the pill in the second or third treat. The goal is to get the puppy to swallow without chewing on the treat because he is expecting the next treat.

For introductions to other dogs, it is important to introduce your puppy only to adult dogs that you know the vaccination status of, or other puppies approximately the same age. If you are introducing your puppy to other puppies, you should strongly consider a puppy kindergarten class, such as the one run here at Absecon Veterinary Hospital. Even if you are beyond the socialization window, classes like this allow for you to practice working with your puppy in a very distracting environment. Please avoid dog parks as many dogs that use dog parks are socially inappropriate and their vaccinations status is unknown. If you do not know any other appropriate adult dogs, you can stand at a distance outside the dog park and work on getting and maintaining your puppy's attention in the presence of other dogs. Be aware that this may not reduce the risk of disease, but it certainly reduces the risk of injury from other dogs.