

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 who are wearing different types of clothing such as hoods, hats, boots, and long shirts. Try to have people of different sizes, body types, and complexions 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 him. 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 him 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 whose vaccination status you know, or other puppies approximately the same age. If you are introducing your puppy to other puppies, you should strongly consider a puppy kindergarten class. 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 vaccination 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.

To complicate matters, there are two fear periods in dogs. The first fear period is generally at 8 to 9 weeks of age. This is usually recognized by the puppy suddenly becoming afraid of things or people in the environment that they previously did not have a reaction to. The second fear period can be anywhere from 6 months to a year of age. During these times, extra care should be taken not to startle the puppy when he is fearful. If your puppy starts to be afraid of things that he wasn't previously, then treat him the same as if he were being introduced for the first time. Do not force him into an interaction, but let him approach at his own speed.

Remember during the socialization process that you cannot reinforce the emotion of fear! If your puppy seems fearful, it is always okay to pet him, talk in a soothing voice to him, or give him a treat. Even if he acts aggressively, this is likely due to fear and will not be more likely to occur if you feed him, pet him, and remove him from the situation. Socialization isn't a perfect prediction of how your puppy will behave as an adult, but it can certainly help to make your puppy more comfortable in everyday environments. If you are struggling with a puppy that seems overly fearful, please contact us at Absecon Veterinary Hospital to troubleshoot.

Congratulations on your new family member and have fun on the journey of socializing him!