



Socialisation of a new puppy

Socialisation is the process whereby the puppy learns about itself, its own species, the other species with which it will live and its environment in general. As all animals develop there are numerous stimuli that they need to become accustomed to in their environment. Failure to do so can result in these stimuli causing fear and anxiety when encountered later in life and can even lead to timidity or aggression.

It is therefore essential to expose young puppies to as many stimuli (people, places and things) as possible at an age when they are well suited to learn from them.

Puppies that are stimulated and handled from birth to 5 weeks are generally more confident and sociable, but the most important period for socialisation appears to be from about 4-14 weeks of age, peaking at 6-8 weeks. Beyond 14 weeks there can be a tendency to act fearfully towards new people, animals and situations.

It is also important to reinforce positive social interaction as the dog matures up to 8 months of age, so that it doesn't forget about the stimuli.

There should be little problem with a puppy that is less than 12 weeks of age developing healthy and lasting attachments to the people, sights and sounds in its new home. Your puppy is most likely to become fearful of stimuli that are not found in its day to day routine, so make an effort to identify these.

Introduce your puppy to as many new people and situations as possible, especially:

- Babies, toddlers and children.
- Country animals (eg. sheep, horses, cows)
- Busy streets, being on a lead.
- Car rides, lifts, stairs.
- Plane, train and motorbike noise.
- Bikes and joggers.
- Hoovers, washing machines and hair driers.
- Mock veterinary examinations eg opening mouth, cleaning teeth and ears, handling paws.

DO NOT FORGET however, that your puppy should never go on the ground in public places until vaccinations are complete, normally by 12 weeks of age depending on the vaccine used. You can carry your puppy around outside before this time and, in fact, it is a very good idea to do so to facilitate early socialisation.

Another solution is for people and other healthy, vaccinated (!) dogs to visit the puppy in its own home. Puppies should not mix with other dogs unless these have had a booster within the last 12 months.

It is important that the puppy is given the opportunity to relax in these new situations and is not just taken out and excited by them all.

One way to facilitate the introduction of the puppy to new situations and people is to provide a reward such as a favourite toy or food treat each time it is exposed to a new stimulus.

If strangers offer a biscuit to a puppy each time they meet it then it will learn to look forward to meeting people. Offering rewards will also discourage hand shyness.

Once the puppy has learned to sit on command, each new friend should ask it to sit before giving the treat. This teaches a proper greeting and will make the puppy less likely to jump up at people. Verbal rewards and fuss also work well.

If your puppy seems to panic, back off a little and try again later, rather than aggravating the fear. **Never reassure a fearful dog as this might serve to reward the fearful behaviour!!**

Consider dog training classes once the puppy has mastered the basics.