Your Guide to Proper Puppy Socialisation



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Congratulations on your new puppy!

At this point you may be feeling overwhelmed or frustrated by the biting, peeing, barking, and zooming.

The endless well-meaning advice from family, friends, strangers, and Dr Google is not helping.

Take a deep breath. I've got you.

You might be focused on obedience like "sit" and "down", or even leash-walking.

These don't matter right now.

Your puppy's critical learning period is between 5 and 15 weeks; their sponge-like brain is at it's most super-absorbent, creating a lightning-fast learner.

Science is now telling us that this critical period might actually end closer to 12 weeks of age.

I'm going to give you a socialisation guide; a clear roadmap so you can block out all the "static" and conflicting advice.

This doesn't mean that missing this opportunity will forever "break" your dog, but it might mean that you'll face bigger challenges as they approach adulthood, and have a tougher time changing negative or neutral associations.

Socialisation problems rarely present in these early weeks. Instead, they present in adolescence (6-18mo) so we have lots of prevention to do!

There are associations that need to be built as early as possible in order to have the greatest effect long term.

So. In order to set you and your puppy up for success, we're going to focus on proper socialisation first.

I can't wait to help you raise your puppy into the dog you've always wanted.



Caryn Liles
Dog Trainer & Behaviour Coach
The Centre for Canine Education Inc.

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Proper Socialisation

We often think that “socialising our puppy” means to bring them to a dog park and let them play with other dogs, but it’s not that simple. Socialisation in humans looks like that - dinner parties, clubs and bars, concerts, meetups, etc. For puppies, it’s not just something they do on the weekends or around the water cooler at work, it’s more of a behavioural vaccine.

A vaccine works by training the immune system to recognise and combat pathogens, either viruses or bacteria. Consider fear and aggression as “pathogens” and the “vaccine” is safe and properly executed socialisation. While vaccines are not 100% effective, they are certainly better than 0%, right?

Let’s build your puppy’s emotional immune system.



The primary and most important time for puppy socialization is the first three months of life.

During this time puppies should be exposed to as many new people, animals, stimuli and environments as can be achieved safely and without causing overstimulation manifested as excessive fear, withdrawal or avoidance behavior.

American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior.

READ AVSAB POSITION STATEMENT

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Get Prepared

Gear:

- a treat pouch
- tiny healthy treats
- a non-retractable leash 6-10 ft long
- a properly fitted harness
- a carrier that allows your dog to see clearly and receive delivered treats

CLICK FOR GEAR RECOMMENDATIONS

Treat ideas:

- Chicken breast
- Low-fat cheese
- Rollover dog food roll
- Boiled pasta with canned tuna
- Deli meat
- Caryn's famous doggie meatloaf

CLICK FOR MORE IDEAS

Checklist:

- People
- Animals
- Places
- Experiences
- Sounds
- Smells
- Surfaces
- Objects

My notes:

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1 → 2 → 3 → 4 → 5

1 YOUR PUPPY PERCEIVES THE STIMULUS

This can be anything novel, such as a person, dog, other animal, place, thing, sound, texture, feeling, touch, vibration, scent, etc...

You want the puppy to notice it before you do anything.

You will know when they have perceived it - they will look at it, perk up, etc...

There's no need to point it out or bring your puppy closer to it (or it to them).

Stay at a safe distance where your puppy is relaxed.

2 YOU START HAPPY-TALKING

Happy-talking is the bridge and it's AS important as the food...but certainly doesn't replace the food in this equation.

The happy-talk is to lighten the mood AND buy you time to move your hand into your treat pouch.

You don't need to go from zero to sixty or do any wild dancing - just calm/happy talk:

"Oh, look at that! It's a person!" / "Ooh, check out that truck! Interesting!" / "Do you hear that motorcycle? Neat!"

3 YOU REACH INTO YOUR POUCH

This might seem like a redundant step but I want to ensure you're not walking around with a handful of meatloaf all the time.

We have to be sure that the puppy notices the stimulus BEFORE you crinkle the baggie and present the treats.

The order of events is paramount to your success.

When you reach in, you can certainly grab a generous handful to start dispensing one at a time.

4 YOU START FEEDING TREATS

Happy-talk alone won't cut it. We have to associate something the dog LOVES...and happy-talk is not intrinsic enough!

Create the pattern of notice the stimulus > happy-talk > meatballs happen.

Your puppy will eventually figure out that these stimuli predict a happy human and meatballs raining from the sky!

Feed a few treats in a row so that it's powerful enough to remember.

5 KEEP ASSESSING AS YOU GO

Be sure to observe your puppy's body language.

Are they:
- trying to escape
- wide-eyed
- frozen
- barking
- yawning
- whining
- scratching
- yelping
- avoiding
- jumping up on you
- crouching
- hiding
- pinning ears back
- refusing treats

If yes, your puppy needs space! Get some distance and provide calm comfort.

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Socialisation is preventing a problem, not treating a problem.

Socialisation can be done right and it can be done wrong. It's important to understand the difference so that you can avoid long-term trauma resulting in behaviour challenges later.

If you're doing it right, you'll see that your puppy is gaining confidence, not showing signs of fear and anxiety when faced with novel people, dogs, places, things, sounds, textures, feelings.

You might even see that your puppy anticipates food when faced with something or someone novel. That is pure gold right there!! Feed them! Trust me.

Do not misunderstand this, however! If your puppy is not showing signs of fear, you must continue this process in its entirety. Just because your dog is "fine" now, doesn't mean they will retain this sociability as an adolescent or adult dog. It can be very misleading if you have a naturally confident or stoic puppy.

Doing it wrong looks like this:

- simply exposing our puppy to novel stimuli without actively creating a positive association (tasty food!)
- pushing them to interact with people when they are feeling uncertain
- letting them interact with dogs who are bullies, too rough, or otherwise inappropriate
- allowing another dog to "teach your puppy a lesson" by over-correcting and frightening them
- keeping your puppy indoors or away from the real world until they've had all their shots

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What if my puppy is reacting negatively?

Oftentimes, puppies can respond to stimuli (novel or common) negatively and there are dozens of reasons for this.

First, let's learn about some signs of fear / anxiety / stress:

- trying to escape
- wide-eyed
- frozen
- barking
- yawning
- whining
- scratching
- yelping
- avoiding
- jumping up on you
- crouching
- hiding
- pinning ears back
- refusing treats

Comfort will not reinforce fear.

Instead, it will teach your puppy that **you** are the source of comfort and safety when they are unsure or afraid.

Food will not reinforce fear.

Food can be used as an **associative tool** (think Pavlov) and not just a reward for good behaviour. It can create a positive association and help a dog recover more quickly from a stressful experience.

Next, let's learn what to do if/when you see these signs:

- Help your dog get some distance by picking them up or gently guiding them away.
- Provide calm comfort; a soothing voice, calming touch, and even sprinkle a few tasty treats.
- Try again at a greater distance or lower intensity OR take a break and do something fun instead.

Lastly, let's learn what NOT to do:

- Do NOT ignore their stress signals
- Do NOT encourage them to get closer
- Do NOT tease them or force them
- Do NOT scold or punish them

THIS is how to reinforce fear:



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Because I specialise in aggression, I do have a bias because of what I see on a daily basis.

Fear and aggression are common in dogs, unfortunately...and they are mostly preventable with the right socialisation and early intervention.

I suggest that you continue to "socialise" your puppy for the first year and a half of life and keep a close watch on their behaviour changes as they pass through adolescence and approach adulthood.

Every developmental stage presents different challenges and these challenges are often amplified versions of what we see in puppyhood.

Okay, but...what about training?

Not a priority right now. Seriously.

You have your dog's whole life to train them to sit, lie down, come when called, and do tricks. The brain can learn these skills anytime in life, but right now, your dog needs urgent care in the socialisation department and it's going to pay off tenfold down the road when you see the fruits of your labour and have a stable, social dog.

But my puppy isn't afraid of anything!

Awesome! That's great news. We never want to see fear at a young age, but this doesn't mean it won't develop over time. You have a lot of prevention to do, so don't get suckered into thinking just because Fido isn't freaking out at the vacuum now, that he never will.

Just because Fluffy loves all people and dogs now doesn't mean she won't be barking and lunging at them when she hits adolescence at 6-18mo or social maturity at 18mo-3yrs.

The process of socialising a puppy is simple but not easy.

It takes preparation, dedication, observation, advocacy, creativity, and compassion.

It also takes support. That's where I come in!



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Want more guidance like this?

Imagine for a moment...

- Raising your puppy alongside other guardians who are in the trenches
- Access to a qualified Professional Dog Trainer & Behaviour Coach
- On-demand AND live interactive virtual training
- Video-tutorials, quick wins and roadmaps for dog training challenges
- Members-only perks and discounts
- Challenges with prizes to win

PLUS...

- Consistent, science-based information
- Positive reinforcement based methods
- Force-free and fear-free training
- Clear direction with downloadables
- Pep talks for those difficult days

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Let me help you raise your puppy
into the dog you've always wanted.



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