

Key Points

- Socialization is lifelong! It starts when the dog is a puppy and continues for the duration of the dog's life! It's never too late to work on behavior modification for older dogs.
- Expose your dog to different people, places, sights, and sounds and build their confidence. Socializing goes beyond just exposure, too! It includes your personal dynamic with the dog and how you interact with him/her when you go out.
- Consider taking a puppy class or training class for older dogs. This is a great way for them to get comfortable being around other dogs and people in a controlled environment.

The process for socializing older dogs is the same as it is for puppies, but with older dogs, slow and steady wins the race! Since older dogs are less adaptable than puppies, stick to just one new thing at a time.

Why Socialization is Important

You want to help your dog become acclimated to all types of sights, sounds, and smells in a positive manner. Proper socialization can prevent a dog from being fearful of children, for example, or of riding in a car. It will help them develop into a well-mannered, happy companion. (Donovan, 2022).

We want to get our dogs comfortable with new places and circumstances. We want our dogs to be indifferent to people, places, and things, and willingly look to us for leadership and direction in new environments. (Frawley, n.d.)

Having a dog who is well-adjusted and confident can even go as far as to save their life one day. According to the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior, improper socialization can lead to behavior problems later in life. The organization's position statement on socialization reads: "Behavioral issues, not infectious diseases, are the number one cause of death for dogs under three years of age." Start taking your dog out to public places once your veterinarian says it is safe, and they will learn how to behave in a variety of situations and to enjoy interacting with different people. (Donovan, 2022)

How to Socialize Your New Dog

Socializing begins at home:

Teaching your new dog manners and how you expect it to live in your home sets the stage for your relationship. It's important to manage new dogs and puppies around the home using either an exercise pen and/or a dog crate in the house to prevent accidents or destruction.

When they are out of the pen or crate, we recommend having the dog on a thin drag leash, too. You can even tether a puppy to you! Allowing new dogs to have free range in your home is a recipe for disaster. Dogs that are tethered to you or being watched can't get into the garbage, they can't sneak around the corner and pee or poop, and they can't jump up on visitors or kids. New pet owners may assume the leash is only for outside use, but using a leash in the house is a great way to control your pup and be proactive about preventing problems. (Frawley, n.d.)

Introduce the dog to new sights, sounds, and smells:

To a puppy, the whole world is new, strange, and unusual, so think of everything they encounter as an opportunity to make a new, positive association. Try to come up with as many different types of

people, places, noises, and textures as you can and expose your dog to them. That means, for instance, having them walk on carpet, hardwood, tile, and linoleum floors, meet a young and old person, someone in a wheelchair or using a cane, a person with a beard, wearing sunglasses or a hood, and using an umbrella. Think of it as a scavenger hunt. Make it a fun game for kids by having them write down a list of everything new the dog experienced that day while with them, such as “someone in a baseball cap” or “a police siren.” (Donovan, 2022).

The most important thing is that your new dog has FUN experiencing these new things! Make sure to offer lots of praise and reward if they respond positively to the new experience. Also, try to remain calm — dogs can read our emotions. So if you are nervous when introducing your puppy to an older dog, for example, your pet will be nervous, too, and may become fearful of other dogs in the future. (Donovan, 2022)

Another crucial aspect of socializing dogs is getting them engaged with you! Engagement begins at home in a distraction-free environment. (i.e., your kitchen, garage, or fenced backyard). Start by rewarding them every time they look at you or tune in. As the dog learns to become more and more engaged with you, you can take the dog to new locations and work on engaging your pup in new places.

Find what motivates your dog the most and use that to engage them. This could be something like a high-value treat (chicken, hotdogs, cheese) or a toy that they really love! The dog will begin to learn that cool things happen when it gets taken to new locations. Gradually, we increase the level of distractions. (Frawley, n.d.)

What to do when strangers approach your pup:

The correct way to handle strangers is to always be prepared with a bait bag full of high-value food treats. If you see that your dog is a little concerned about someone, then get the dog engaged with you. It's your job to become more interesting than the stranger and if the food rewards are high enough, the pup will look at strangers as the trigger for their owner to play with them and give them really cool treats.

The same thing goes with new places that stress your dog. If you see the dog getting a little nervous, get him engaged with you. Teach the dog new scary places are not that bad after all because they are places where they get to play with their owner and get cool dog treats. (Frawley, n.d.)

Take it public:

Once your dog is used to a small amount of stimuli, move outside of their comfort zone and expand the amount of new experiences he'll have. Take them to the pet store (after they have started their vaccination series), over to a friend's house for a canine playdate, on different streets in the neighborhood, and so on. Work on engaging your dog in different settings so they know that regardless of where you go, it's still a fun experience with YOU, their handler!

Go to training classes:

Once your dog has started vaccinations, they can also attend training classes. These classes not only help your pet begin to understand basic commands, but they also expose them to other canines and people. Skilled trainers will mediate the meetings so that all dogs and people are safe and happy during the process.

Sources:

Donovan, L. (2022, July 7). *Puppy Socialization: Why, When, and How to Do It Right*. AKC.
<https://www.akc.org/expert-advice/training/puppy-socialization/>

Frawley, E. (n.d.). *How to Socialize Your New Puppy*. Leerburg.
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