



# Socialisation – what does it mean?!

Puppies learn about their environment by exploring and learning which experiences were good or bad. Before a puppy is 12 weeks old they will meet new situations with curiosity, after 12 weeks old they will approach with apprehension.

Socialisation is about introducing them to all the animate things they are likely to meet during their adult life, such as other dogs, people of all varieties, sheep, cows, horses etc.

Giving your puppy lots of positive experiences when they come across different situations will help them to be calm and happy throughout their life and approach new things with confidence. With positive early experiences they are much likely to bounce back if, at a later stage in life, they meet something a little scary.

A puppy that is not introduced to a variety of experiences, or that has a negative situation, will possibly express behaviour problems in the future such as fear, anxiety and aggression. Therefore it's vital to socialise your puppy correctly.

## Gently does it

The world can be a scary place for a young puppy, plus they are not fully protected from potentially life threatening germs until they have completed their vaccination program. Therefore it is important to take care and introduce your dog to situations safely and positively in a way that does not overwhelm them.

If a puppy becomes frightened of something before 12 weeks old, it may struggle to get over that fear in later life. For example if your puppy is taken along a busy road and gets a fright that overwhelms it, it may become frightened of traffic for life, which will have a negative impact on walking and travelling with your dog.

Your puppy should not be allowed to meet unfamiliar or unknown dogs or walk on the ground along the pavement or in a park before it has completed its vaccination program. Therefore you should carry your dog out and about in your arms to give them some key socialisation opportunities. A short walk along a few quiet streets for their first trip out will give your puppy appreciation of new smells, sights and sounds.

## Gradual scale

Experiences should be built up gradually, starting with very small, gentle encounters that the puppy can cope with and then gradually increasing their exposure day by day.

Use praise, tasty treats and fun toys to reward your puppy with each new experience.

Your puppy does not have to come into actual contact with something in order for them to socialise, it happens as soon as your puppy can hear, smell and see them.

## Things to socialise your puppy with

- People – adults, children, babies, men, women, people wearing hats, people wearing coats, men with beards, ladies with sunglasses, etc
- Dogs – different breeds and ages
- Animals – horses, chickens, cows, sheep, squirrels, etc
- Locations – the park, the woodland, the beach, etc

Remember gradual, gentle, positive experiences!

## Socialising your puppy with different dogs

Puppies need to learn how to behave around other dogs. They should not engage in play with every dog they meet as some dogs, such as older dogs may find this distressful, painful or simply annoying.

Socialising a puppy with another dog should start with them getting to see, smell and hear other dogs passing by. You could sit with your puppy on a bench at a quiet park and let them watch other dogs, or stand with them on the pavement as another dog walks by.

You could invite a friend and their friendly, vaccinated dog around to visit you or you could go to visit your friends. Allow your puppy to explore and greet in their own time, and if the puppy is trying to get away from the adult dog then calmly and positively separate the dogs and keep the adult dog from overwhelming the puppy, as well as interrupting the puppy if it becomes too rough or persistent with the adult dog. Interactions should be kept very short so as not to tire either dog out or allow your puppy to get too over excited.

It will benefit your relationship with your dog if your puppy is polite with other dogs and does not seek them out as a main source of fun, you should be the most fun thing in a puppies life.

## Recognise when your puppy is scared

Familiarise yourself with dog body language and pay attention when your puppy looks scared. Common signs are the ears going back, the tail drooping and being tucked underneath, wide staring eyes, lip licking and the puppy may try to lean away or escape. If your puppy looks frightened then remove them from the situation.

It is misguided to think that the puppy should face their fears. Studies have shown that dogs' fears will likely increase, making that experience worse and have a negative impact on their future experiences. Keep calm and gently remove your puppy to a familiar safe place.

Next make a plan to greatly reduce the intensity of the experience they just found frightening and on another day introduce your puppy to the lower intensity experience again with lots of reward. This may just involve showing your puppy the object from a further distance away, or muffling the sound so that it is quieter.

## Socialisation continues for life

Although the key window for socialisation is before a puppy reaches 12 weeks old, this doesn't mean it stops here. Make sure that you pair potentially new or more intense experiences with a reward to make the situation positive for your dog.

If you have acquired your dog once it is over 12 weeks old be sure to follow the socialisation guidelines above, gently introducing the dog to new animate objects and pairing these with something rewarding.

Speak to a Dig It Instructor for further advice.

## Remember...

Correct socialisation saves lives.