

Socializing our Dogs

Socializing our puppies is vital to their self-confidence, ability to adapt, and trust. Many people have the common misconception that socializing is introducing our dogs to other dogs and letting them play at the dog park. That is the furthest thing from the truth. Socialization is introducing your dog to all kinds of new environments that build their trust in your relationship and confidence in their own abilities.

The most important stage for puppies is 8-16 weeks. There are ways to take them in public without exposing them to viruses. Putting them in a wagon, carrying them, taking them to places you know are safe. Introducing them to people in uniforms, loud noises, people with different skin tones, long hair, short hair, hats, beards, dresses, etc. Different textures in landscapes, grass, grates, gravel, sand, stairs, bleachers, etc. The world is amazing with all the tools we have on hand.

Dogs shouldn't be socialized just when they're puppies either. It is an ongoing process. Socialization can be reversed if suddenly, the dog is kept at home for long periods of time and not exposed to current environmental conditions. I get quite a few dogs from the Humane Society and Shelter that are usually over a year and reactive to people and other dogs because of the lack of socialization. I expose them to new situations, but I'm careful at first of their thresholds. For instance, if other dogs cause them to be reactive, we simply hang back where it's safer and slowly work on other behaviors getting them to focus on us and not the other dogs. Taking them into places that might frighten them because of sliding doors for example. We walk on the outside a few days, past the sliding doors. Then eventually sitting by the doors as they slide open, working on a behavior such as sit while the doors slide. When they don't try to run and maintain a sit, they get rewarded, and we leave. Working each day until we can go in. This is just one example. I take them to the playgrounds and get them to walk on different surfaces. Holding a sit or down while there. Never reward nervous behavior with a pet, treat, or coddling. Simply act like it's no big deal. An important thing to remember is to gently push but not "flood" them. Don't push them too hard because then it can undo all that you just tried to achieve by making them comfortable step by step.

Remember, reward the behavior you want. When they give you a sit or down and focus on something else other than what is terrifying them, reward that! I also talk to my dogs in a level voice when they are confronting something that might frighten them. I don't make a big deal of it and let them check it out to their hearts content. This builds confidence.

Confidence is so essential in our therapy dogs. Watch their body language to see if a particular scenario is starting to worry them. Take them back a few steps and focus on something else. This way, you're not teaching them to fear things, but actually catching a problem before it becomes an issue you'll have to work through.

Dogs will usually go through 3 fear periods in their life. The puppy stage at 8-12 weeks, when they start to come into maturity 12-16 months and when dogs become elderly. Helping them transition with socialization skills builds them up to be strong, confident, non-reactive dogs!

Prepared by Canine Program Team for use by C4C Members.