

Get Puppy S.M.A.R.T.: Socialization

We know people don't bring home a happy puppy aiming to turn it into a hyperactive, uncontrollable dog. We know that new puppy owners are focused on essential – not to mention time-consuming and exhausting – puppy-raising tasks like housebreaking and keeping a puppy from chewing the couch. We also know the fear of exposing a puppy to potential life-threatening illnesses, like parvo, makes owners wary of taking a not-yet-fully-vaccinated puppy out away from home. All these things conspire to create the #1 reason puppies develop behavior problems: lack of proper socialization. If a puppy is not properly socialized, they can ultimately land in the shelter or, sadly, become candidates for euthanasia.

This problem is so prevalent that the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior published a [position statement](#) that states the new standard of care for puppies is that they be “exposed to as many new people, animals, stimuli and environments as can be achieved safely” before they are fully vaccinated.

What does this mean exactly? Well, it means that in the midst of pee pads and chew toys the clock for proper socialization ticks away and before you know it - BAM! The window where a puppy's sociability outweighs fear – a mere three months – has slammed shut.

Now that we know the WHY, let's talk about HOW to safely socialize a puppy that doesn't have all its shots.

Socialization is about introducing a puppy to new things in a positive way. Always bring small pieces of something delicious, like real chicken, on your outings to help create a positive association. Forcing a puppy into scary or stressful situations isn't positive, so the key is to be gradual and consistent. If your puppy is showing signs of fear and trying hard to withdraw from or avoid a situation, move away from what is scaring puppy and try to get him focused back on you and the treats. Try to get to a place where the puppy is still aware of the “scary” thing, but is taking treats. We want the puppy to realize that the “scary” thing isn't really that scary, and he can trust you to protect him by moving away if it is.

The main categories of socialization are:

New People

Take your puppy to an outdoor coffee place, shopping area, or big box store where the puppy isn't likely to be exposed to dog feces from potentially ill dogs. Think concrete vs. grass. Bring a little bed or mat where the puppy can sit while you sip your coffee. Invite people to come give your puppy a treat. Who doesn't want to pet a puppy? You're guaranteed to get some action. Try your darndest to expose your puppy to people of all skin colors – not just in the spirit of diversity but because light skin looks “different” from dark skin, and “different” is what can freak a dog out. (You'd be surprised at how many calls we get from bewildered owners who are convinced their dogs are ‘racists’).

Other Animals

It's great if your puppy likes your other dog and has met your neighbor's dog, but you can't stop there. Find a reputable facility that hosts puppy play dates. Qualified trainers will be able to coach you on proper play behavior. Be choosy about the dogs you allow your puppy to meet. The last thing you (and puppy) need is to have a bad

experience meeting a new dog. Pick puppies and other dogs that you know are vaccinated and are dog friendly. Rely on professionals for help in this area – it's that important.

New Environments

Again, just because your puppy joins you in the car to take the kids to school and has been on every street in your neighborhood doesn't mean she has been exposed to lots of different environments. Car rides are great. Weather permitting, your puppy can join you on errands even if she never gets out of the car. She can observe the world through the windows from the safe confines of her crate. Visit as many friends' homes as you can. Take her to pet supply stores, and any establishment that is dog-friendly. Use a stroller or wagon if you're concerned about your puppy being on the ground. Going in and out of stores just holding your puppy is an exercise in socialization. A darkened lobby of a movie theater looks vastly different than Home Depot. If you're carrying a puppy you can sneak into lots of places for a quick look around.

Stimuli

Stimuli is sciency talk for stuff in the environment that could cause a response from puppy, such as noise. Reactivity to sounds or noise is one of the most common forms of under-socialization we trainers see. A strange sound in a new environment can shut down an under-socialized dog. Strange-looking things can also cause puppy to go on alert – and by strange-looking we just mean something your puppy has never seen before. Like a balloon. Or a leaf rake. Or an umbrella. Vacuum cleaners can look and sound scary. Introduce puppy to these items slowly. Associate new things with tasty treats. When the yard guy or pool guy comes over, allow puppy to observe from a safe place. If puppy (and the yard guy) seems calm, use the opportunity to have puppy meet a new person and see some new stuff. But don't overdo it with the loud tools...let your puppy observe the leaf blower from afar at first.

Stimuli Close to Home

Take puppy on walks in your neighborhood – stay on the sidewalk or in the street to avoid dog poop – and take note where the hyperactive, unpredictable dogs live. These are the dogs that go crazy behind a window or fence as you walk by. Some puppies might notice but not react, but some will get a little nervous. As you approach those spots, start giving puppy treats. Same procedure when you come across a dog going crazy at the end of a leash. Don't force puppy to get too close to crazy, but watch and see how puppy feels about these situations. Remember: if puppy is stressed, change directions and move away and onto something else. The key is to make these occurrences seem like no big deal AND also result in a payoff.

Socialization is something you'll do throughout your puppy's life, but it's especially important in the first three months. It requires planning, effort and creativity. And some of you will have to work harder than others because of your puppy's inherent temperament and experiences your puppy had even before you got him. But it's necessary and the payoff is undeniable – you get a happy, well-rounded dog, and you can spend your training dollars on something more fun than doggy behavior rehab.

Get Puppy S.M.A.R.T.: Management

The good news/bad news about management is that it's all on you. It's up to the human half of the puppy-having equation to set up a no-mistakes environment. This means puppy doesn't have the opportunity to make a mistake.

The main areas of management:

Confinement: crate training, exercise pens, boundaries, being alone

Creating a no-mistakes environment means that puppy gets virtually zero unsupervised time outside of a confined space. No free access to your house. The ideal set-up is a puppy apartment. This could be an exercise pen, laundry room, or part of the kitchen blocked off with gates. Puppy's apartment not only keeps her out of trouble, but it's where she learns to comfortably be alone – a valuable life skill she needs to develop. The puppy apartment should contain a crate and, if you're not home for potty breaks, potty pads. (Ideally puppy can spend some time in an exercise pen placed outdoors on the surface you ultimately want puppy to use regularly for potty as this can really speed up the potty-training process.) Puppy should have things to chew on and play with.

When you can't supervise puppy, she should be in her apartment (or crate with the door closed if the periods are shorter). And when you're able to keep an eye on her, she can have some liberty but must always be in your sight. Always. Have puppy drag a leash on a flat collar and use it to gently guide her away from no-puppy zones, like furniture or the pantry. If there's something you don't want puppy to chew, it must be put away. Doors to bedrooms and bathrooms should be closed, and kids' toys picked up. Remember: at this stage it is your job to manage the environment and to show puppy what you want.

Housebreaking: supervision, observation, tight management

One of the most frustrating aspects of raising a puppy can be housebreaking because it requires constant supervision, observation, and tight management (see Confinement above). You're either right there to take her out, or she's in the crate where she won't want to potty. Create schedules and use timers. Use a leash to take puppy to the potty spot at the right time – after naps and meals – and give a reward on the spot when puppy potties (don't interrupt her while she goes, but immediately after say "good girl!" and give her a treat). If puppy doesn't potty, she should go back to confinement (crate) and try again in a few minutes. When puppy is being supervised outside of confinement, we must constantly be observing for signs that puppy needs to go (circling, sniffing, whining, anxiousness). Remember, puppy doesn't just "know" that you want her to potty outside: puppy will go where the payoff is, so you have to show her. Keep in mind that using potty pads delays puppy's learning to go outside.

Life skills: greetings, excitement, staying calm

Helping puppy become a nice-to-live-with dog starts now. Although obedience training will be an important part of your dog's life, most people don't want a dog that has to abide by a series of obedience commands in order to simply be in the house. Most of us want a dog that can just "be," a dog that gets the concept of personal space and doesn't demand attention or jump all over people when they walk into the room. Maintaining a calm energy while people come and go is learned at an early age. Puppy is learning whether the sight of you – and family members and guests – means "WOO HOO!!!!" (read: excited energy accompanied by jumping and mouthing) or a more calm "hello friend" accompanied by calm energy, unobtrusive sniffing, and a waggy tail (which, by the way, is how dogs greet each other. The ones that are too excited are quickly corrected by their doggy counterparts). We often inadvertently create excitement the second we walk into the room and greet puppy with an excited voice, heavy eye contact, and lots of excited petting (human-to-human style greeting). Then we get annoyed when puppy jumps and uses her mouth inappropriately – both excitement-related behaviors. Instruct family and guests to ignore puppy when coming into the room and then, when puppy is composed, give calm petting and attention. If puppy gets too

excited with the attention simply walk away. It's harder for us than it is for them, but they'll learn very quickly that in order to get attention they must remain calm.

Kids & Puppies: gentle handling, appropriate play

The concept of "management" in a household with young children and a new puppy seems laughable. We know that kid energy puppy energy = crazy-making. And we sympathize. A child's age and ability to follow your instructions will determine how much access to and freedom with puppy to give the kids. Puppies, especially small breeds, can quickly develop an aversion to handling and/or to children if mishandled. Teach children to pet gently. Don't allow them to pull on puppy's leash or constantly try to pick puppy up. Make sure puppy has an 'escape route' when playing with the kids – that he's not trapped in a corner or being held back by a leash. If kids are running, screaming, doing normal-but-exciting kid stuff, puppy may try to join in the fun by jumping, nipping or chasing. That's a good time to put puppy away with a yummy chew bone (there's that "management" thing again).

As all-consuming as proper puppy management is, you can collapse into bed at night knowing that all your hard work in creating a no-mistakes environment will help your puppy become the nice-to-live-with dog you've always wanted.

Get Puppy S.M.A.R.T.: Activity

Every puppy owner wants to know what activities they can do with puppy to burn off some of that puppy energy. The key is to play in a way that doesn't encourage behaviors that, although normal for dog play, are unsafe for play with humans, like mouthing and jumping.

When puppies and dogs play with each other, play mimics fighting behavior. This is normal. Lots of mouthing, tackling, pinning, growling. Adrenaline runs high. But dogs give each other lots of cues through their body language that let each other know it's all in good fun. And when it gets too intense, they have ways of letting each other know that, too.

When playing with us, we want puppy to play at a less intense level. We don't want the play to be so stimulating that 'fight' behaviors emerge and puppy can't calm down. This is especially important for households with children. A young child's natural energy - and all that running, yelling, squealing, and grabbing - can be interpreted by puppy as invitations to play, which can easily ramp up to an unsafe level.

So what are the do's and don'ts of puppy play?

Do:

- Get a long training lead, which is a 15-foot or longer cotton leash (not to be confused with the 'retractable' leash) found at pet supply stores, which you will use throughout your dog's life for training. Use it to take puppy into the front yard or another puppy-safe place to investigate and play with toys and kids.
- Play "Gotcha" and "Boomerang" which reinforce puppy paying attention to you and coming when called.
- Teach rules around toys. For example say "take it" when puppy takes a toy into her mouth, and "drop it" when it's your turn to hold the toy. (Teach "drop it" by holding a treat in front of puppies nose and say

“drop it” as she lets go of the toy to take the treat). If you like to play tug with your puppy, these rules are essential.

- Offer puppy a toy to chew if she starts targeting your body parts.
- Walk away from playtime if puppy gets too excited and starts biting or jumping. Tell kids to cross their arms (hands are prime targets for puppy play), turn their backs, and walk (not run) away.
- Have a few 15-20-minute play sessions per day, and quit before puppy becomes exhausted.

Don't:

- Roughhouse – the dog equivalent of wrestling. Puppy is too young to pull this off without going over the edge. It doesn't mean that you'll never get to rough house with your dog, but at this stage, especially with kids, puppy teeth are still too sharp and impulse control hasn't kicked in.
- Encourage obsessive behavior or play over any one toy, such as a ball. We all know that dog that can't be in close proximity of a ball without demanding it be thrown over and over again. The simple fact is that a ball-obsessed dog is in a constant state of fixation. This is not pleasant or relaxing for a dog and interferes with your relationship and training.
- Mistake overly wired energy with natural energy. Like overly tired kids, puppies become unmanageable when they need to take a break.
- At this age a little activity can go a long way in providing puppy a healthy way to burn energy. Remember to keep it low-key and consistent so puppy will take some nice naps and you can get some things done.

Get Puppy S.M.A.R.T.: Red Flags

Red flags are behaviors that require help NOW. Even when we're doing everything we can to be Puppy SMART, sometimes we see red flags in our puppy's behavior that should immediately be addressed. As trainers and behavior professionals, we spend a lot of time dealing with issues in adolescent and adult dogs that presented themselves in puppyhood, but were difficult to interpret, or which well-meaning owners thought puppy would outgrow.

Below are the most common puppy behavioral red flags:

Fear

- Puppies will naturally be wary of new sights and sounds as they learn to process the weird and changing world around them. The important thing is that they recover quickly from being startled. A truly “fearful” dog gets stuck.
- A healthy and psychologically sound puppy should be somewhat eager to interact with people and other animals.
- Mild hesitation in approaching unfamiliar places, sounds, people or objects is appropriate.
- More than a few seconds to recover from mild hesitation could indicate fear.
- Repeated attempts to escape a situation or interaction, or refusing delicious treats are signs of fear.
- Avoiding or hiding from people, animals, or objects is an indication of fear which may progress to aggression during adolescence and social maturity.
- It is important to teach a positive emotional response NOW.

Aggression

- Aggression is technically defined as behavior with intent; in puppyhood aggression usually arises out of fear. Overly aggressive fear-based responses (below) are not typical for puppies that have no history of a negative or frightening experience in such situations.
- Growling, snapping, biting, stiffening, cowering, lunging, prolonged alarm barking, prolonged raising of hackles in response to people or animals.
- Rule out any medical cause (e.g. pain, over-reactivity due to hearing or sight difficulties)
- Seek behavioral help NOW.
- Overly excited puppies can appear “aggressive” with growly sounds and snappy mouths, which is usually a sign that we need to tone down play/excitement.

Handling issues

- A visit to the vet is often the first time owners notice their puppy has problems with being handled.
- Mild mouthing during play and handling is normal.
- Growling, stiffening, snarling, hard mouthing during physical handling (toenail trims, vet exams, hugging, lifting) are not normal and may indicate fear or pain.
- Rule out medical cause.
- Work on creating positive associations with visiting the vet and being handled.

Resource guarding aka “possession aggression”

- In the dog world, possession is nine-tenths of the law. A dog thinks “if I’ve got it, then it’s mine”. Although dogs often respect this possession law amongst each other, sometimes we see puppies that are overly possessive of resources - toys, bones, food, their bed - toward humans.
- Freezing, growling, snapping over food bowl or other high-value item.
- Resist urge to show puppy “who’s boss” by grabbing puppy or item; this only reinforces puppy’s instinct to guard.
- Become the “Pez dispenser of goodness” when you walk by your puppy when he has a high-value item by dropping a treat next to him.
- Work with a professional to evaluate your puppy’s tendencies toward possession aggression and come up with exercises that teach puppy an alternative to guarding.

Separation Anxiety

- Sadly, separation anxiety is one of the most difficult things we deal with in adult dogs. Many puppies show some signs of stress – whining, crying – as they adjust to being away from littermates, or being away from owners. These behaviors should disappear if confinement, departures and arrivals are handled properly.
- “Separation Anxiety” is an often-overused term to describe puppy behaviors, like demand barking or destructive chewing, that simply require more management or training.
- True separation anxiety is when dog goes into a panic mode when left alone and stays panicked until owners return.
- Typical symptoms: extreme destruction, long-term howling/crying (hours vs minutes), self-harm (obsessive chewing on paws), excessive drooling (fills up or soaks the crate pan or lining).

- Crate training, teaching puppy to be alone, low-key departures and greetings, help prevent the development of separation anxiety.
- Associate departures w/positive things, like a chew treat in crate after you grab your keys to leave.
- Preventing separation anxiety may prove to be one of a puppy owner's most important tasks.
- Sometimes puppy owners are so focused on solving typical puppy problems, like housebreaking, that behavioral red flags are overlooked. Keep in mind that puppies do not outgrow these behavior problems, and they become worse as puppies enter adolescence. Seek professional help now while puppy is still young and learning.

Get Puppy S.M.A.R.T: Training

During the first few months puppy is in your home, it's easy to get into problem-solving mode and forget about actually training puppy. Most training at this stage is focused on prevention so that normal-but-annoying puppy behaviors don't become habits. For example, we know it's important to manage the excitement when we interact with puppy so he doesn't jump, but what can we have him do instead?

Teach substitute behaviors

"Sit" is a great alternative behavior to jumping. And one of the most basic obedience commands your puppy will ever learn. By distracting puppy from "bad" puppy behaviors (jumping, biting, mouthing, barking, which are usually excitement related or attention seeking) and teaching him alternative behaviors, like "sit" or "down" or "high five" we are opening up the lines of communication with our puppy. We are building the foundation for future training, and we are creating a positive working relationship.

Manage your expectations

Can puppies learn obedience commands? Absolutely! Does this mean that once learned, they should be able to comply anytime, anyplace? Nope. It's important to keep expectations in check when working with your puppy.

Like with humans, a puppy's age and corresponding developmental stage dictate their capabilities. While puppy may have no problem giving you a nice "sit" in your kitchen, she's not likely to do that right away when you're, say, at the park. The new environment is too distracting. You'll need to make sure you've always got some extra tasty treats, like small pieces of real meat, and work your way up on the distraction scale.

Training for life

As your puppy goes through adolescence and into adulthood, she'll be able to work up to more advanced training. In the meantime, enroll in a good puppy obedience class which not only teaches basic obedience commands, but also focuses on all the S.M.A.R.T. components.