

Puppy Socialization: What It Is, Why It's Essential

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The socialization of puppies comes from two sources, human and canine. The first acts of socialization come from the interaction between the mother and her puppies and then the littermates. Socialization begins at birth, and continues for most of the dog's life.

The period between 3 and 16 weeks is very critical in a dog's development. This time is referred to by dog experts as the canine socialization period. During this time, a puppy learns about the world in which he lives. Everything is a first impression. Everything is a new experience. From these first experiences, a puppy's memory is developed.

Once the mother's work is well underway, it is our turn as breeders to assist the process. A puppy is part genetics and part environmental experiences. A reputable breeder has done his part in producing puppies with strong, stable genetic predispositions. At three weeks, a puppy is ready to be molded by each new day and all it brings. It is very important that the breeder expose the young puppy to a safe, happy world full of stimulation, gentle challenges, and positive rewards. Exposure to as many different noises, sights, smells and experiences is vital to producing a stable, well-tempered puppy. Car rides, collars, walking on leashes, cats, other breeds of dogs, children, high pitched voices, and crates all are seemingly simple, everyday stimuli that we expect our dogs to respond favorably to. We often take for granted that these are all new and therefore potentially threatening experiences for a puppy. When someone they have learned to trust exposes them to the new experience, it reduces the stress and can be quickly viewed in a favorable light.

By eight weeks a puppy may be ready to expand its world from the breeder's home to its own home. A breeder knows when each individual puppy is ready to leave the comfort of its litter. The breeder then matches each puppy with a home suited for each puppy's temperament. The puppy will have been exposed to a number of people, different places and new situations. It will have learned some

basic manners, and perhaps some basic obedience commands. It will have learned about nail trims, ear cleaning and teeth exams. And critically, by interaction with its mother and littermates, it will have learned much about acceptable behavior within a family unit.

Puppy socialization does not stop with the breeder. The puppy will need to learn many new things and how to behave in new circumstances. It is imperative the new family continue with daily socialization and positive new experiences. Puppy kindergarten is a wonderful chance for puppies to meet other young dogs of different breeds in a new and different environment. Trips to the various pet supply stores that allow dogs inside is another opportunity to experience new sights, smells and sounds. As the puppy grows and especially through adolescence, continued exposure to a wider range of people, places and animals is critical. A well socialized puppy is one that is happy, confident and reacts favorably to any situation he encounters on his journey through life.