

PUPPY DEVELOPMENT & TRAINING

Congratulations! Now that you've adopted a furry new member of the family, you'll want to know all about how to help your pup mature into a happy, stable adult dog. Get ready . . . You've got a lot to do! Puppy ownership is all kinds of fun—but it also requires a great deal of patience and gentle, thorough teaching. It's crucial to socialize your puppy VERY well and shape her early development, starting as soon as you bring her home.

SOCIALIZATION: MAYBE THE MOST IMPORTANT THING YOU'LL EVER DO FOR YOUR DOG

Socialization refers to the process of exposing your puppy to a wide range of people, places, animals and things—AND making sure that she has plenty of positive experiences. Many people don't realize how important it is to concentrate on this task.

The *critical socialization period*, during which heavy-duty socialization should occur, lasts from about 3 weeks to 4 months of age. During this stage, puppies are highly impressionable and need to spend lots and lots of time experiencing new things and benefiting from varied kinds of social interaction. After this period, it's much more difficult to adequately socialize young dogs—but if your puppy is over 4 months old, don't panic. Just get started with socialization NOW.

Here are some experiences your new puppy should have, as early and as often as possible:

- Meeting people of both sexes and all shapes, sizes, ages and colors. Focus especially on interaction with children, men and elderly people.
- Meeting different-looking people, including those in wheelchairs, men with facial hair, people wearing hats, glasses and uniforms, and anyone with any kind of disability or trait that makes them stand out.
- Meeting well-vaccinated dogs of all ages, as well as cats, horses, guinea pigs, livestock—and any other animal you can round up!
- Walking on a variety of surfaces, including concrete, grass, gravel, stairs and slick flooring.
- Visiting loud and/or crowded places.
- Visiting the vet's office—just for cookies and fun—MANY times. During these “pretend” vet visits, the vet and vet techs can handle your puppy, but nothing painful or frightening should happen.
- Encountering fast-moving and/or noisy things, like bicycles, skateboards, cars and running people (especially kids). Don't allow your dog to chase moving objects or people. Just allow her to experience seeing them, so that they don't frighten or overly arouse her in the future.
- Hearing many new and strange noises. If your puppy becomes startled by sudden sounds, deliver her favorite treats immediately after the noises happen. That way, she'll learn that there's no reason to be afraid. Unfamiliar sounds mean good stuff for her!

As you introduce your puppy to new people and experiences, it's critical to focus on forming positive associations. Not only should she MEET new people, she should learn that new people predict fabulous things—like tasty treats, petting and playtime. Take your puppy on “field trips” as often as you can—every day, if possible—and always carry delicious goodies for strangers feed her. You can feed her treats too, right after she encounters something novel and different. Say, for example, you and your puppy are walking around your neighborhood, and a kid rides up on a bicycle. Hand the kid some treats to feed you puppy, and then let her sniff the bike. Give her more treats when she investigates the strange, new object.

Treat delivery is especially important if your puppy seems at all nervous about something or someone new. You want to convince her that the scary thing, whatever it is, isn't scary at all—in fact, when she sees it, you start doling out treats! Don't worry that you'll be “reinforcing” your puppy's fearful behavior. That's a common myth. If YOU were scared of something and somebody suddenly handed you a check for \$1,000, would you be *more* afraid? Nope. So giving your pup food when she's fearful isn't going to make things worse at all. You might, however, increase your puppy's fear if YOU seem worried and anxious, so it's important to act calm and happy if your puppy spooks at a person or thing. She may try to retreat, hide behind you or bark. It's normal for puppies to do that sometimes. Don't *force* her to interact with or approach whatever's frightened her. Instead, let her investigate at her own pace. Just be patient and act like it's no big deal. If you're not stressed out and remember to make treats rain from the sky whenever the scary thing or person appears, your puppy will soon gain confidence.

During the socialization process, you will have to take disease prevention into consideration. Since socialization should start as early as possible, you'll need to be careful about where your puppy walks around and which dogs/other puppies she meets. Until she has had all of her vaccinations (usually by 16 to 20 weeks of age), your puppy is not protected from diseases that other dogs may carry, like Parvovirus. To reduce the risk of illness, choose your puppy's new canine pals carefully, making sure that they're all well-vaccinated and healthy. Also avoid letting your puppy walk around in areas where many other dogs have been, like dog parks, busy city sidewalks and pet stores. Tote her around instead, in your arms, a backpack or a stroller, so that her paws don't touch the ground in high-traffic areas. That way, you can give her the benefit of proper socialization out in the world, which is essential to her *behavioral* health, without exposing her to diseases that threaten her *physical* health.

Although the most important socialization in your puppy's life will take place before she's 4 months old, do continue to provide opportunities for your young dog to explore and experience the world as she grows up. Until she reaches behavioral adulthood, at about 2 years of age, she should have frequent adventures, encounter new things and meet many new friends.

HANDLING

In addition to meeting new friends and experiencing new things, your puppy will need to get used to all kinds of touching and restraint. Think of all the things that you'll want your puppy to happily tolerate as an adult dog, like being held at the vet's office for examination and vaccination, nail trimming, brushing, baths, petting on all parts of her body, etc. If she learns to handle all those things as a youngster, she'll feel a lot less stressed out in the future, during social interaction with strangers, veterinary care and routine grooming (and so will you). Here are some tips to help your puppy get used to the many kinds of handling that she'll experience throughout her life:

- Just as when socializing your puppy, you'll want to focus on forming positive associations. The key is to convince your puppy that handling predicts great stuff for her, like food, fun and games.
- Touch your puppy all over, very frequently, and have other people do so as well. Stroke her, scratch her, massage her, rub her belly, give her hugs and kisses, etc.
- Practice holding your puppy still for a few seconds at a time. If she struggles to get free, just calmly and patiently continue to restrain her until she stops moving and relaxes. Then you can let her go and give her a treat. You DON'T want her to learn that wiggling when restrained earns her liberty. You DO want her to learn that patiently holding still until you release her results in freedom and rewards.
- Handle the sensitive parts of your puppy often, like her feet, ears, tail and muzzle. Pretend you're doing a vet exam. After touching each part, deliver a tasty treat. Before long, your pup will LOVE it when you “examine” her.

- Practice “pilling” your puppy. This exercise will make it easier to open her mouth if you need to feed her pills in the future or retrieve “illegal” objects that she’s picked up. Gently open your puppy’s jaws, as if you were going to stuff a pill into her mouth. Instead, insert cookies.
- Help your puppy get used to wearing a collar and leash early-on. When you’re around to supervise, you can let your puppy drag a light leash around a bit, just to get used to the way it feels. (Don’t let your puppy do this when she’s alone. The leash may get tangled or wrapped around furniture, which could be dangerous.) If your puppy seems uncomfortable about her leash and/or collar, make a new rule: Put the leash and collar on right before mealtimes. Then you can take them off again after your puppy finishes eating.
- Be sure to help your puppy get accustomed to basic grooming tools, like nail trimmers, hair brushes, clippers and toothbrushes. Many adult dogs don’t tolerate grooming well—and who can blame them? Sometimes it involves pulling, poking and discomfort. To ensure that your dog WILL tolerate—and even enjoy—getting touched, clipped and coiffed, teach her to associate grooming with good things. Clip a nail, feed a treat. Brush some fur, feed a treat. Turn on the electric clippers, feed a treat. Easy exercises like these will pay off big-time in the future.
- If you find that your puppy is already sensitive about handling, read our handout, *Handling Problems*, for help.

BITE INHIBITION

Just as we humans rely a great deal on our hands as we carry out our daily activities, dogs use their mouths to explore the world, occupy themselves and interact with each other. Because adult canine mouths are equipped with sharp teeth and powerful muscles, it’s very important for dogs to learn how to control jaw pressure in order to avoid injuring each other—or you—during play and interaction.

The most intense chewing and biting happens during puppyhood. The discomfort of teething causes some of this behavior, but puppies also frequently “mouth” each other during play because this activity helps them learn how to be gentle with their sharp puppy teeth. If one puppy mouths too hard on one of her pals, he’ll probably yelp and quit playing with her for a while, which is a valuable lesson. The message: “If you bite me too hard and it hurts, I’m outta here!” This is how puppies develop *bite inhibition*, the ability to inhibit the amount of pressure they exert when using their mouths.

If your puppy is 18 weeks or younger, it’s actually a good idea to let her mouth on you during play for a while, so you can help her learn how to be gentle. Let your young puppy chew on your hands as long as the “bites” are relatively soft—but when you notice harder chomps, yelp like a hurt puppy or say “Ouch!” in a high-pitched voice. Then stop play and give your puppy a short time-out (1 to 5 minutes). If you repeat this exercise, your puppy will learn that mouthing on you too hard results in the end of all fun and interaction for a while. Later, after your puppy has learned to be careful with her mouth, you can yelp and stop playtime EVERY time she puts her teeth on your skin.

If you’d like more information about this topic, please refer to our handout, *Puppy Mouthing and Play Biting*.

RESOURCE GUARDING PREVENTION

Many dogs will growl and may bite when people or other dogs try to take away food or other valued resources (chew bones, toys, etc.). This is a common and natural—but certainly undesirable—canine behavior. In order to train your puppy to let you take things away from her, start practicing early.

- After you give her a tasty chew bone or toy, cheerily reach down and take it away from her. Then give her a fantastic treat and return the treasured item. She’ll learn very quickly that it’s GREAT NEWS when

you reach for her things. She gets them back anyway (at least most of the time) *and* she gets a bonus prize!

- Pet your puppy gently while she's chewing or eating and then deliver a goodie.
- When your puppy's eating chow in her bowl, walk past and drop something tastier than her food into the dish. With repetition, she'll start to look *extremely* happy when you approach while she's eating.
- Teach your puppy to play with her toys with you. Try playing tug and fetch, and train her to drop her toys when you ask her to do so. When the two of you are interacting with a toy rope, for example, tug for a few seconds. Then say, "Drop it," in a happy voice and put a treat on your puppy's nose. When she drops the toy, let her eat the treat. Then reinstate the game of tug or throw the toy for her to chase. After you repeat sequence a few times, start delaying the time between your cue, "Drop it," and the presentation of the treat. Soon, your puppy will release the toy BEFORE you show her the goodie. When this happens, you should still give her a reward (the treat and/or more playtime), but you won't need to bribe her with a lure.

It's a good idea to start resource guarding prevention early. If you notice that your puppy already freezes, growls or snaps at you when you approach her while she's eating or try to take away her stuff, please call our Behavior Helpline for advice. You can also read our handout, *Resource Guarding*, for information about what to do. DO NOT try to punish your puppy for guarding behavior. That will only worsen the problem.

EARLY TRAINING

There are all kinds of good behaviors and habits your puppy will need to develop, so start training her early. Puppies' minds develop quickly, and young dogs are capable of learning simple new skills as early as 8 weeks of age! Your puppy can start to learn polite canine manners, like sitting for petting, coming when called and how to play with her own toys, and, of course, you'll want to teach her to relieve herself outside as soon as possible. (However, keep in mind that although pups are ready to learn a lot when they're very young, it may take them a while to develop bladder and bowel control.) There are many good resources out there to help you along. Start learning about dog-friendly training methods based on positive reinforcement. Investigate puppy classes in your area, which should focus on teaching your pup new behaviors, as well as provide socialization and playtime with other dogs her age. Of course, you can also ask us at the Richmond SPCA for guidance. We can provide further reading on additional puppy-related topics or offer one-on-one counseling.

RESOURCES & RECOMMENDED READING

If you'd like more information about puppy rearing, socialization and development, we highly recommend reading ***Before You Get Your Puppy*** and ***After You Get Your Puppy*** by Dr. Ian Dunbar. You can find those books in our Lora Robins Gift Shop. We also recommend reading our other handout on puppy socialization, *The Puppy's Rule of 12*, provided by trainer Margaret Hughes. For additional advice, please call our **Behavior Helpline** anytime at **804-643-SPCA**. We'd be happy to help.