



Puppy Socialization



The first few weeks of your puppy's life in their new home is very important for forming behavior patterns that will influence the rest of their life. Socializing your new pet is the MOST IMPORTANT JOB you have in accepting the job of a puppy owner! Puppies that are not sufficiently socialized may face normal everyday situations with anxiety and fear. When insecure or scared, dogs respond by running away, growling, or biting. Most dogs that bite do so out of fear, not aggression.

All animals, including humans, go through this process called socialization. The individual learns what it is (dog vs. cat. vs. human) and what other types of animals to accept into its immediate proximity without fear. The socialization time period in dogs is limited to 3-12 weeks of age. After the 12th week, the un-socialized puppy may be fearful of strangers and social situations they are not accustomed to.

What does this mean for your puppy? If the puppy is to get along with other dogs when they grow up, they must learn that it is a dog! If they are ever to breed they must know what the other dog is! If they are to be boarded or live around other dogs, this species identification is critical. Most puppies are taken away from their littermates at 6-8 weeks of age. If they do not see another dog until months later, they can act shy or aggressive around others of their own kind. Play sessions with other dogs, or puppy socialization classes are an important part of the socialization period. If the dog is to ever live with cats, they should learn what cats are all about too.

Puppies also need to know what humans are...humans of all sizes, shapes and ages. Expose your puppy to as many people as possible, especially children and men! They must learn that people are fun, not threatening. Puppies will think people are great if they offer them treats. After 12 weeks of age, these socializing experiences should be occasionally reinforced to make sure they are not forgotten.

Puppies also need exposure to as many real-life situations as possible. If the puppy is raised in a relatively isolated environment with only their owners, they will show problems when taken into different social settings as an adult. They may hide from guests, not eat when the owner is gone, or growl and bite at strangers. If the puppy becomes used to different sounds (cars, vacuum cleaners, screaming children, doors slamming), different sights (wheelchairs, people with beards or glasses, crowds, people in white coats) and different surroundings (vet clinics, groom parlor, boarding kennel) as a puppy they will be much less stressed when presented these situations as an adult.



Rewards

FOOD is the strongest and most effective practical reward. This primary reinforcer is used by many trainers and animal behaviorists. The key to using food reinforcers is to establish a schedule of reinforcement. When teaching a new behavior, reward every time the dog performs the task. As the dog becomes proficient, reward only occasionally. Eventually phase out food altogether.

VERBAL praise is effective in some cases. The tone of your voice is more important than what you say. High-pitched happy voices are pleasing to dogs. Verbal praise can be delivered anytime, anywhere, but your timing must be accurate for the praise to be effective. If verbal praise is given at the same time as a food re-enforcer, the dog will pair the two rewards and your verbal praise will have a great effect, even when not paired with food.

PETTING or stroking is pleasant for dogs. Often however, this reward takes place after, not during, the execution of the desired behavior, which can confuse a dog. Some dogs react adversely to touch and it over-stimulates them and causes them to lose concentration. Be sure that your strokes are not distracting to your dog.

ATTENTION is valued by all dogs. Just by acknowledging a behavior you will be delivering a reward. For example, some dogs bump against people when they want to be petted. If you respond to the bump, even by telling your dog to go away, you have given the dog attention. They will bump you again if they want more attention.

PLAY is not an immediate reward, but it is a powerful game. Knowing your dog's favorite activities can help you identify a good reward for it. If your dog likes to chase balls, toss some to your pal at the end of a training session. The dog will associate the pleasant event with the training session. This type of reward allows both of you to let off steam.

Corrections

SCRUFF SHAKES imitate the correction a mother gives to her pups. The message is loud and clear: NO! Take the loose skin on the back of the neck and shake it sternly. The dog may yelp, but its feelings will have been hurt more than anything else. This exercise also helps establish you as the pack leader.

RATTLE CAN (a beverage can filled with 5 or 6 pennies and taped shut) is a handy tool to have around. The can is used to startle the dog when they misbehave. If your dog is digging, chewing, or barking at inappropriate times, startle them by tossing the can at their feet (Do NOT deliberately hit the dog with the can!) Thus, the dog associates correction with act, not with the owner. Most dogs are sensitive to noise, and the rattle can is very effective if the timing is good.

NOISES such as shouts, high pitched tones, and pounding are effective with most dogs. The key is to startle the dog enough to interrupt their naughty behavior. Then remove them from the scene of the crime. (Never punish a dog by placing them in their crate; the crate should be a place of retreat for the dog, not a place to put them when they are "in the doghouse.")

VERBAL REPRIMANDS are effective with some dogs. The verbal correction must be firm and sharp. Your facial expression should match your irritated tone of voice. If verbal corrections are paired with other corrections, they will be stronger.

PHYSICAL CORRECTION does more harm than good. Instead of producing a sound-tempered dog, it can destroy the dog's temperament. Dogs that are hit often become fearful and unreliable. Other corrections are much more effective.