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## Puppy Socialization

**When:** Timing is key. The most important time to socialize your puppy is during the first weeks of life, especially weeks 4-12. During this time, the puppy's brain is in the developmental stage; he is primed to learn and accept new experiences. Learning continues after this point, of course, but drives to establish independence and dominance (rank) can inhibit your puppy's openness to new things after this age.

This narrow window of time means that dogs that aren't properly socialized during the first three months of their lives may have severely underdeveloped social skills. Puppies not socialized well are shy and fearful of new people or experiences.

Within the socialization window, is what is known as the 'fear window' around 8-11 weeks of age, when puppies can react strongly to new things and make deep associations with certain people or situations. It is always good to take small steps and move gradually. Begin socializing your puppy in small groups before proceeding to a potentially threatening large group of active dogs. Take your puppy only places where you can control the situation and keep it from being frightening to him.

**How:** Introduce your puppy to the people, animals and objects that will be in his environment and help him learn how to interact with or respond to those things appropriately and without fear. In the home, this can include exposing him to the vacuum cleaner, stairs, grooming tools (brushes, combs, nail trimmers, clippers if applicable), running water, fans, mirrors and appliances that make sudden loud noise (blender, hair dryer, garbage disposal).

Outside the home, consider initiating contact with people carrying umbrellas, people wearing hats, men with facial hair, people in wheelchairs, on bikes, in cars, and so on. The more positive experiences he has as a puppy with these things, the more confident he will be as an adult.

Don't forget to introduce your puppy to children, whose high-pitched voices and quick movements can frighten or arouse aggression in adult dogs that haven't had the chance to get familiar with them. Closely supervise meetings between puppies and children to make them a positive experience for both.

You will doubtless come up with people and places for socialization opportunities: use treats, lots of praise, touch and gentle play to convince your puppy that the new sight, smell, person or situation is fun. End each introduction on a positive note, perhaps with a treat, affection or short play session with a favorite toy.

**Puppy "Kindergarten" Classes:** These are great places for your puppy to learn about other dogs. He will learn to share and interact with owners and other dogs at his own pace. Refrain from forcing your pup to interact; instead leave the when, how and how much up to him.

These classes can be safely begun once your puppy has started his vaccine schedule. Make sure to keep your puppy separate from any sick or aggressive animals in the class. Can't find a class? Many pet stores host classes, or just ask your friends or neighbors. We'll be happy to help you find the situation that works best for you. Don't want to do a class? No problem. Just take stock of your dog-owning friends and neighbors and invite them and their fully-vaccinated, healthy adult dogs to your home.

**Keep it up:** Even though primary socialization is over by 12 weeks, your puppy will continue to grow through new experiences as he ages. Puppy socialization plants the seeds of confidence and good behavior; ongoing socialization lets both you and your dog reap the rewards!