

Puppy Socialization and Training

A common lingering myth pertaining to dogs is that training shouldn't begin until after six months of age. However, by this time the primary developmental stages have long passed and habits, good or bad, have already begun to take hold. Early training and socialization are key factors in a well-rounded dog able to take on the competitive ring.

Learning and socialization begins from the time the puppy enters the world despite an initial lack of senses. The period up to sixteen weeks is fundamental to puppy development and experiences during this time help shape the dog he will become. Interactions with the mother, littermates, and anyone the pup has contact with makes an impression. From the mother the pups learn social skills and how to properly interact with people and other dogs, and are then able to practice with their littermates. It is important that a pup is not removed from his litter too soon (no earlier than seven weeks) as he can miss out on critical learning experiences. Pups removed from the litter too early are often socially inept with people and other dogs due to not having learned all the communication signals from his mother and littermates.

While puppies are still with the litter, the breeder can begin basic socialization and imprinting exercises to allow the puppies to experience various situations they will encounter later in life while in a safe environment. Exposing the pups to as many experiences as possible in a positive manner will help them be more confident, better equipped to handle stress and problem solving as an adult, and more easily trained for their future endeavors. Simple exercises like getting the pups accustomed to being handled, walking over different types of surfaces, exposure to various noises, short car rides, etc. with lots of praise and reinforcement for calm behavior will show the pups that these new experiences are nothing to fear. Allowing pups to be introduced to a variety of different looking people will also help them to become indifferent or non-fearful of anyone they may encounter. In doing these exercises, it is important that the pups remain calm and that the experience is not too stressful, as this can be just as damaging as no experience at all.

Upon bringing a puppy home, training and socialization should carry on in the new environment. Continue to expose your pup to safe new situations in a calm and confident manner, rewarding him regularly for the desired behavior. At the ages of about eight to eleven weeks, some pups go through a “fear period” that typically lasts about one to two weeks. During this time the pup may exhibit a fearful reaction to something they had previously been comfortable with. It is important to not reinforce the fearfulness with coddling or attention as this relays the message to the pup that this is the desired reaction. Instead, remain confident yourself and go on with calm praise for the correct reaction.

Once the puppy leaves the litter and has received the appropriate vaccinations, new owners should allow exposure to new dogs in a controlled environment. In order to prevent a bad experience with new dogs at this young stage, choose the dogs to which you expose your pup carefully. Dogs that are calm and act appropriately are ideal, while dogs that bully or act aggressively should be avoided. A dog park is not the ideal setting for new introductions with a young dog as there is no way of knowing what dogs you might encounter. Instead, taking your pup to a group class for puppies provides a more controlled environment along with the guidance of a professional trainer should you need help. Group classes also allow you to train your pup in a new environment with a variety of distractions so he learns from the beginning to listen and pay attention to you no matter what.

Whether or not you attend training classes with your puppy, training should begin the day you bring him home. From the beginning, reward your pup for calm, quiet behavior in the home, eliminating in the correct place, and for playing with his designated toys instead of shoes or household items. Mental stimulation toys help greatly with chew training as they keep the pup engaged. This shows your pup the appropriate behaviors that are expected and rewards him for them rather than waiting for inappropriate behavior and correcting or redirecting it. Clicker training works well for puppies as it delivers a quick, consistent signal and that a reward is on the way. It can be used for reinforcing good behavior in the home, as well as basic to advanced training and helps promote more active learning.

While all puppies need socialization and imprinting on common experiences, those intended for competition require more to prepare them for their sport.

- Conformation dogs need to learn how to stack and move, and be at ease being handled not just by you, but also by new people over the body, feet, head, and mouth.
- Hunting dogs should be exposed to decoys and bumpers through retrieval games, along with water, boats, gunfire (at a safe distance), a variety of environmental terrain, and clicker training for the sit, sit to whistle, and directions.
- Competitive obedience dogs need to learn to focus on the handler and react quickly to cues or direction. Obedience training should be made fun with the use of toys and clicker training to teach attention heeling, sit down, stand, etc. to hold their interest.
- Agility dogs need exposure to noises, targets, and uneven or unfamiliar surfaces. It is very important to not jump a young dog higher than their elbow height or push them beyond physical capabilities in order to avoid injury.
- Schutzhund dogs need the same obedience training as for competitive obedience, in addition to training with scent pads for tracking, confidence building, socialization to a wide variety of people, and a strong desire to play with toys.

Regardless of future plans for your puppy, it is important to remember that he is still a puppy and should not be pushed harder than he can handle. Any socialization or training should be a good experience to maintain interest and make it fun for you both. Though dogs go through several life stages before they reach maturity, a strong foundation from the start makes all the difference.

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