

Why it is Necessary to Socialize and Habituate a Puppy

Courtesy of Association of Pet Behavior Counselors & Diane Sullivan
[Good Dog Training Center & Doggie Resort](#)

It has been said in studies that one in four dogs have behavioral problems to some degree. It isn't so much a problem for the dog – heck, they could care less. No, the problem is that these behavioral issues affect the owners' lives and those that surround these dogs. Many dogs show a weakness of temperament or inability to cope when faced with certain situations.

According to a member of APBC, “Socialization can be described as the process whereby an animal learns how to recognize and interact with the species with which it cohabitates. By learning how to interact with these species, the socialized dog develops communication skills which enable it to recognize, amongst other things, whether or not it is being threatened and how to recognize and respond to the intentions of others. Habituation can be described as the process whereby an animal becomes accustomed to non-threatening environmental stimuli and learns to ignore them.”

There is a period of development that is sensitive for the dog in which socialization and habituation must happen and be properly completed if the dog is not to grow up with behavior problems.

In essence:

- a dog that has had no experience of specific stimulus at the completion of this sensitive period, will always be fearful of it,
- a dog with some exposure, but not enough, will be slightly more adjusted, although not entirely sound
- A dog that has had adequate exposure to a wide variety of day to day stimuli and gained enough experience with it in that sensitive period will grow up to be what we call “bomb proof,” or highly adaptable to all sorts of stressful situations.

But the old axiom, “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure”, has never been more applicable than in the first few weeks of your dogs life. That is why if you want to get a dog from a breeder, make sure they are knowledgeable about shaping the very beginning of that puppies life till you get the chance to take over. If you don't have that opportunity, and you get a puppy from a pound or shelter, take over the role of “bomb proofing” your new addition to all the sights and sounds and smells and tastes you can.

It has been shown that puppies, pre-stressed in early life, have a much better capacity for coping with stress and those who do not receive the stressful experiences once they have matured. It is essential to the success of training that a dog is able to cope with stress and has a positive response to complex stimuli and situations. If the dog cannot cope with this, it will inhibit learning, and training in and of itself, requires the dog to have the capacity to process complex stimuli.

You may wonder why a puppy will have a fearful response to something or someone if they have never had a fearful encounter with that person or object. The answer lies in their ancestry. In their natural environment, wolves, to whom every domesticated dog is related, have to be alert to danger, which means treating anything which they are not already familiar with as potentially harmful. The problem that we see with our domestic dogs, then, is that it has to become familiar

with an enormous number of stimuli in a very short times period so it will be able to live in and cope with the diversity of our world. One cannot discount the importance of genetic predisposition or good breeding, but conversely a lack of socialization/habituation can ruin the chance of that individual developing that sound temperament, however good the breeding has been. Socialization and habituation need to be continuously reinforced throughout the age of 12 weeks to maturity, approximately 8-10 months of age.

If you are wondering what kind of practical applications this is referring to, look no further than guide dogs for the blind. These animals have to be so completely socialized and habituated, that when they are ready to be paired up with a blind client, they do it with confidence that they will be able to be the eyes for that person. They cannot shy away or be fearful of any day-to-day situations.

That said the question remains: Why are so many puppies under-socialized and under-habituated? I'm afraid 'time' is the culprit. Most of us do not seem to realize that these creatures need a lot of work and we as a culture are of the mind set that if it does not already come programmed or have a manual to look at, if it does not already know what to do, get rid of it. Millions of Dogs are euthanized every year because of these easy-to-fix issues. Instead of socialization and habituation being haphazard affairs with experience occurring at random, make a conscientious effort to expose them to all life with you is going to offer. A puppy that has had regular experience of television, vacuum cleaner, etc. will be more able to cope with the world than one that has been shut away and not exposed to anything.

Look for Part Two, **How Do We Go About Socializing and Habituating Our Pups?**