

How to Socialize and Habituate a Puppy, Part 2

Courtesy of Association of Pet Behavior Counselors & Diane Sullivan

[Good Dog Training Center & Doggie Resort](#)

While I still believe it is important for the puppies to have the right start in life with a responsible breeder who recognizes that proper stimuli be given to the puppies before they are taken to new homes, the prospective new family can perform a few simple tests to ensure the puppies are content and confident at that stage of development. You can clap your hands or drop your keys to see how well the puppies react. Do they move away from the sound or toward it to investigate it? A mild reaction to the sounds and then quick recovery from the surprise is ideal. One of the biggest signs is the puppies' response to the presence of strangers, for example, the prospective buyers. They should be willing to approach and investigate the newcomers and be happy to allow themselves to be handled.

Things to be done in your home

Visitors: Make sure your puppy receives lots of visitors of both sexes and all ages. This will develop social experiences and help to keep territorial behavior on the more manageable level in later development. Make sure the visitors only say "Hi" to the puppy and don't make a fuss over the puppy until the initial excitement has subsided.

Children: Make sure your puppy gets used to being handled by your visitors' children, but don't let them pester it or treat it as a toy. Arrange to meet someone with a baby regularly, especially if you plan on having a family of your own in the near future. Remember that this commitment to your puppy is only the beginning. So many of my clients call me after having a baby and are concerned on how their 4 or 5 year old dog will act, or is acting.

Feeding: Make sure you get your puppy used to you and other members of the household adding food to its bowl when it is eating. This helps teach it that you are not a threat and help to prevent the development of food related aggression later in life. On the other hand, teaching your puppy that you can take its food away, while its eating is a bad idea, this approach can cause food aggression later in life.

Grooming: Groom or handle your puppy every day, even breeds that do not require extensive brushing or grooming later in life. The act of grooming will accustom your puppy to being thoroughly handled and it can also stem the development of dominant behaviors.

Veterinary Exams: At least every other day examine your puppy's ears, eyes, teeth, lift and check paws and under the tail. When your puppy is content or used to this kind of treatment, see if other people will do it (animal-loving friends are easier to talk into doing this.) The purpose of the exercise is to accustom your puppy to veterinary exams, which is very important, especially if an emergency situation arises.

Everyday Sights and Sounds: Let your puppy experience the sound of vacuum cleaners, spin dryers, dishwashers, etc., but don't make an issue of them. They should get used to them gradually without being stressed by them. If you have your postman and regular delivery people coming to the house let your puppy say "Hi" to them so as not to create an atmosphere of aggression about their comings and goings.

Leash Training: Prepare your puppy to walk on a leash by first getting it used to its collar inside. All puppies will do what I call "the bucking bronco routine" on the leash the first time you use it. So once it is used to wearing a collar, then attach a piece of rope or some type of line inside and let the puppy drag it around, then pick up the rope and use small tugs plus encourage it with a treat or toy to walk with you. I also use a "walk-about exercise" in class to help associate walking on a leash with you after its been used to the collar and leash for a few days inside.

Learning to be left alone: While socialization is very important, so is learning to be left alone. Puppies who are not accustomed to being left alone on a regular basis are much more likely to suffer from some type of separation anxiety. Three symptoms of separation anxiety are destructiveness, incessant howling or barking and loss of potty training inside. To help prevent this get the puppy used to being left alone for an hour or so in the beginning. You can do this in their crate if you are crate training, and can even do it while you are home but away from you in the house, like in a laundry room area or other room of the house. Try it with the door to the room open then over a period of time shut the door. Do not go back in if the puppy is crying; return when it's quiet. If a puppy thinks it can call you back it may never accept being alone. Do not make a fuss when leaving or coming home. You will only be setting it up for leaving if you say "bye-bye" and talking as soon as you arrive only highlights the loneliness of your absences.

Things to do away from home: Go to all the places you can think of that will help your puppy become "bomb proof". Always start with quieter areas. If it's the street start with quieter side streets. Places where people congregate and may be interested in gently handling your puppy. In the car, take it everywhere, so the puppy won't know the only time in the car is meant for the vet's office.

Finally, what should you do if a puppy shows fear while you are socializing it?

- 1) Do not overreact. If you coddle or try to soothe a puppy you could be reassuring or re-enforcing its fear. As "pack leader" you should appear to be unaffected and unworried so you set an example.
- 2) Do not try and pressure the puppy into approaching the item or person, as you will highlight its fear by drawing more attention to it.
- 3) Expose the puppy at a safe distance to the stimulus that worried it as often as possible so they become desensitized to it. As the puppy becomes less worried bring the object or people closer.
- 4) Reward the puppy every time they do not react to the stimuli, or as soon as it recovers from its fright if it does react.