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Safe Puppy Socialization

If your puppy is under 16 weeks old, they need to have positive experiences around a variety of sights, sounds, and places. Puppy classes are only one place and a limited number of people and dogs. Variety and positive experiences are key.

So, how do you socialize your puppy before they have all their shots? Here are a few ideas to keep your puppy safe and still give them the exposure they need.

* Watch people and dogs from a distance - overly-exuberant puppies can learn that they don't always get to greet everyone and shy puppies can learn that new dogs and people aren’t scary.
* Expose your puppy to other dogs...from your car: Sit in the parking lot of the dog park and let your puppy watch the dogs come and go. Contact is not necessary for safe socialization!
* Carry them into dog-friendly stores. If you are going to place them in a cart, place a clean sheet or bed in the bottom and hold your puppy’s leash to keep them from jumping out.
* Schedule a playdate with a friend/family member. The dog should have a known history with puppies (not just adult dogs) and be current on their vaccines.
* Be generous with rewards.  Cheese. Hot dogs.  Small little tasty bits of meaty, cheesy goodness that accompanies all new and potentially scary experiences.
* Fill a kiddie pool with water bottles, boxes, and other strange objects and let your puppy explore all the strange sounds and textures.
* Carry your puppy into the vet for non-vaccination visits and the groomer (if your dog will require grooming) for a quick treat without the shots.

What To Avoid

A safe socialization plan also involves knowing what not to do.

* DON’T Force your puppy to approach, enter, or interact with anything that they aren't willingly approaching, entering, or interacting with. EVER.  Shy puppies may need multiple approaches to work up the courage to interact.  Don't force it.
* DON’T Place your puppy on dirt or grass in public areas or in yards where friends/family have lived for less than two years. Some viruses, like parvo, can live in the soil for years.
* DON’T Take your puppy to the dog park until they are at least 5-6 months old and have already been socialized to other dogs.  Dog parks are for socialized dogs, not for socialization.  Being charged, swarmed, knocked over, mounted, and generally terrorized is not a positive experience.
* If you don’t ever plan to visit the dog park, that’s okay, too! Plenty of dogs prefer to spend time with people and dogs they know rather than interact with unknown dogs at the dog park.
* DON’T Let well-meaning strangers overwhelm your puppy with enthusiastic greetings, invasive handling (hugging, kissing, etc.). Let your puppy choose when and if they approach.
* DON’T Let your puppy meet strange dogs you encounter in public.  Relying on a stranger to know their dog risks your puppy's safety.

If your puppy shows high levels of fear or aggression during these sessions, find a behavior consultant who works with puppies and can help guide you. Visit IAABC.org to find an expert near you.

It's A Lot of Work...But You Only Get One Chance to Do It Right

Socialization needs to begin on Day One.  The first 6 weeks in your home should be devoted to providing your puppy with safe socialization.

There are many reasons that dogs develop fearful or aggressive behaviors and lack of early socialization is only one. But by doing all this work, you reduce the risk that your puppy will have a problem in the future.