

Puppy Socialization

Puppies need to experience many different objects, people, and environments in positive ways to properly develop into adult dogs who can cope with the world we live in. At the shelter, puppies do not get even basic socialization that a puppy born in a home environment would get. Therefore, it is extremely important for dedicated, intentional socialization time with these dogs.

The goal in introducing puppies to each new experience is for the puppy to have a positive experience. Puppies should be allowed to explore and approach on their own and initiate interaction. Do NOT force a puppy to do anything it does not want to do. If the dog is hesitant, use positive encouragement in the form of verbal coaxing and praise or treats to help the dog learn to cope with their emotions and learn on their own.

There is a Socialization Checklist we recommend you follow to help your puppy become well rounded with their experiences.

For each task, make sure the experience is positive, utilizing treats and verbal praise to reward the puppy. Under no circumstances should you punish the puppy. If the puppy is behaving in an undesirable manner, such as mouthing or jumping, use a toy to put in their mouth to bite that item instead. If the puppy is jumping, turn away from the puppy until they put all feet on the ground. If the puppy is refusing to do something (example: will not walk on leash), use treats to reward small progress, such as one or two steps forward. Some tasks will be more difficult and will progress slower. Be patient and reward the small steps.

Use small training treats to lure a puppy closer to an object or person that they do not want to approach. Place the treats in a line between the puppy and the object to get the dog to approach. When it approaches, allow them to sniff and investigate, and then reward the dog with praise and another treat.

Keep an eye out if you see that your puppy that has an extremely negative reaction to an experience. An extreme negative reaction may include: Growling, nipping, lunging, struggling for handling. These are all normal behaviors, however, if a puppy reacts strongly, you may need to work slower with this puppy on that item.

For each task on the checklist, you want to introduce the dog to the object or task in a positive manner. For some tasks, all that is needed is for the dog to experience the task or object and be given praise and encouragement to alleviate any fear that may arise from the experience. Other tasks the puppy needs to learn how to appropriately interact.

The following are examples of some of the more challenging tasks:

People running by – for this task, we do not want the puppy to learn to chase people when they are not engaged in play. The person engaged with the puppy should reward the puppy for calm behavior when they watch someone run by. If the puppy cannot calmly watch the person run, the person should try to focus the puppy in play, distracting them from the running person.

Canes/Walkers – for this task, we want the puppy to investigate the object, but otherwise it should ignore the object. If the puppy engages in play with the cane/walker, the puppy should be redirected to play with appropriate toys.

Crates – for this task, we want to slowly get the puppies used to crates. Start by tossing treats inside the crate and allowing the puppies to go in and out at their leisure with the door open. Once the dog is comfortable going into the crate, you may place a toy in the crate to encourage them to lay down inside the crate with the toy to chew on, or a peanut butter kong, leaving the door open. Slowly progress to shutting the crate door and leaving them in for short periods of time.

Leashes/leash walking – for this task, the puppy needs to learn how to walk on leash. Using a slip leash, place the leash on the puppy's neck and allow them to walk with it dragging, getting used to the weight around their neck. Play with the puppy while wearing the leash. Call them over to you, so that they walk, dragging the leash, while they come to you, take a few steps back and give them a treat for coming to you. Next, practice walking, taking a few steps at a time and giving treats to the dog for walking with you. Use treats to lure the puppy to walk by you if the puppy does not want to come forward. The puppy may have a strong reaction to pull away to get out of the leash. Allow the puppy to learn and behave without punishment. Do not pull the leash tighter or force the puppy to walk. Stop walking and encourage the dog to come close and to walk with you using treats and verbal praise.

Fly swatter/Shopping cart/Broom/Umbrella – these tasks are everyday objects that people may use and that may be scary for the puppy. The dog should be allowed to investigate and sniff the object, praising the dog. The dog should investigate the object, and then ignore it. Once the dog has stopped investigating the object not in use, practice using the object as it is designed to be used (sweep up some dirt, swat a bug). Start with small and slow motions. If the dog starts chasing or trying to play with the item, stop using it and encourage play with their toys. The dog should learn that it is more fun to play with their toys than with the object. If the dog is fearful, stop using the object, and go back to a point where they were comfortable with the object, allowing them to sniff it while it lays motionless on the ground and offering treats.

Handling tasks/brushing – for these tasks, you will want to use peanut butter to distract the dog and allow it to associate these tasks with pleasant food. Start by offering peanut butter on a lick mat, kong, or spoon. Once the puppy is engaged with the peanut butter, then slowly touch the dog, moving forward only when the dog is engaged with the peanut butter. For example, if you are doing nail trims, touch the foot first, then when the dog ignores your hand on the foot, you may move forward to try to lift the foot, then touch the nails, then use the clippers. If the dog stops eating the peanut butter and tries to pull away or reacts negatively, you have moved too fast and should go back to the point at which the dog allowed you to handle it while eating the peanut butter. Try to end the task BEFORE the dog has started to have a negative reaction.