

Year of the Puppy

Over the past few years there has been a steady stream of media coverage about “dogs gone bad,” referring to adult dogs that have bitten, attacked or even killed. Even with the negative news coverage, there still seems to be a great reluctance from dog owners to take heed when advised to socialize their puppies as early as possible. The problem is not “dogs gone bad,” but rather dogs that have been undersocialized as puppies — a problem easily solved with early social intervention.

NATURE AND NURTURE

Dogs and humans share the need and desire to be social. Dogs in the wild travel in packs and rely on each other for survival. They also have elaborate rituals for courtship and companionship. Much of this ritualized behavior continues to be “hardwired” in domesticated dogs even though they have learned to appreciate and seek affection from a variety of people and sometimes other species of animals. What dog do you know that doesn’t enjoy a scratch behind the ear or a good belly rub? So, what is the “rub?”

For dogs, being social in our domesticated and urban settings is not always natural. Or what might seem like natural social behaviors at home does not extend beyond the comfort and familiarity of home. Despite this, we set the bar exceptionally high for dogs with respect to their behavior in public.

Consider a young child, for example, kept in isolation until age 15 and then suddenly thrown into a group situation with 20 other children. Chances are very good that she would be extremely fearful, or awkward and, in turn, would act out or say something inappropriate.

With human children, we understand and accommodate their need to “learn” to be with and around other children and adults. We encourage interactions and set up “playgroups” for them. We coach and supervise these play sessions and provide them the feedback they need to ensure they play well and behave in socially acceptable ways.

If Katie hits Sally while playing in the sandbox, Katie will be watched, coached and supervised to make sure it doesn’t happen again. Why, then, do we not give young dogs the same opportunities?

Puppies that are kept away from other dogs, people or urban settings and then, suddenly, thrown into social situations may react with fear and may, in turn, behave badly. Like children, young puppies need exposure to unfamiliar things and encouragement when they react well. And, they also need to be told, in no uncertain terms, when their behavior is unacceptable.

IS YOUR DOG FRIENDLY?

Most owners are unsure of when or even how to socialize their puppies. Some become so apprehensive, they spend



Clockwise from above: It is critical to socialize a puppy starting at a young age. Here, Suzie Q, a 14-week-old Boston terrier, is about to meet Scout, a four-year-old boxer; exposing a puppy to children at an early age is also very important; after introductions, Scout and Suzie Q enjoy a frolic with the Frisbee.





Above: Scout and Suzie Q get acquainted. Left: Socializing with kids of all ages and sizes. Below: Suzie Q learns to back off after a warning from Scout—an important lesson for young dogs.



their time on walks, for example, avoiding other dogs, people or things their dog reacts to negatively. Not only does this render the walk unpleasant, it is also reinforcing the negative behavior, by conveying the message that other dogs are, in fact, something to fear.

The good news is that leash management and other techniques for walking reactive dogs are not difficult to learn. Many of my clients who have come to me with dog-to-dog or dog-to-human aggression problems have adult dogs that were simply “undersocialized.” They were not exposed at an early enough age to the many things that can make them fearful, like fast moving cars, bikes, skateboards, motorcycles, children running, playing and making noises and people who are in uniform.

Unwanted behaviors like barking, lunging, growling, snarling, or snarking (snarl/bark) or ambivalent ones, like coming toward you and then suddenly retreating can all, in fact, be fear-based behaviors. Regardless of what motivates the behaviors, they are very scary to encounter for both the owner and the stranger on the street, not to mention the guest at your door.

SOCIALIZE EARLY

Many of these behaviors can be avoided with a simple program of early puppy socializing—starting with the puppy in his or her litter and continuing when the pup is in his or her new home at around eight weeks of age. How do you do that? Enroll in a good Puppy Kindergarten class. Simple, right? Not quite!

Here’s the challenge: Many veterinarians warn their clients about exposing their new puppies to infectious diseases. For that reason they tell new puppy owners not to take their dogs out in public prior to having their full set of vaccinations, which can take up to six months. In those first six months, your puppy is the most receptive to learn from and accept a variety of situations. I encourage new puppy owners to enroll in reputable Puppy Kindergarten (see “Picking a Puppy Kindergarten Class”) as early as eight weeks—while taking precautions concerning their health at the same time.

According to Dr. Peggy Power, a small animal veterinarian in Tacoma, “Dogs can be safely socialized if controlled environments and situations are chosen. Public parks should be avoided until the final vaccine after 12 weeks of age, since viruses can be shed in the feces of unvaccinated dogs and stay viable on sidewalks and grass after the ‘shedding’ dog itself is long gone.” Your own veterinarian can give you specific advice according to your particular puppy’s vaccine protocol and lifestyle. Visits with fully vaccinated dogs in their homes are also safe.

According to Power, “Puppy classes are also generally safe,” as reputable trainers are aware of the risks and take appropriate precautions. Over the many years of conducting Puppy Kindergarten classes, “I have never once had a report of a puppy becoming seriously ill from being in class.”

With that issue put to rest, let me explain why it is so critical to provide your puppy with intensive socializing before it reaches six months of age. To match their shorter life cycles, dogs have a significantly shorter learning and development cycle. By six months, most dogs have “learned” important behaviors that will be imprinted on them for the rest of their lives. After that, any bad habits need to be unlearned, often a long and costly process.

So it’s your choice: teach your puppy what he needs to know early on, when he’s the most receptive to learning and being molded, or wait until he is older and has established behavior problems that will need to be corrected. Given the option, I’d go with early socializing.

GET STARTED—THE MEET AND GREET

Where do you start? As soon as your puppy is home with you (even as early as six weeks), start exposing her to people and new situations. The one thing many people don’t realize is that dogs are unable to “generalize” information in the same way that we do. What this means is that every situation is completely unique to your puppy. For example, exposing your puppy to a child of one age is not enough to make him or her comfortable with all children.

Full socializing will require exposure to kids of every age, size and temperament. Introduce your puppy to children with toys, children who are making noise (the way most do), children who are running around and so on. A child who is a toddler is a much different experience for a dog than one who is two or one that is four years old. Next, start taking your puppy



Suzie Q practices walking on leash and the sit command, both of which she seems to have mastered.

into situations with many children and invite them to come over to you, to say hello. If this process appears prohibitive, consider going to a day care or school playground – the kids will be happy to join the puppy fun!

Make sure your puppy is not overwhelmed by being introduced to too many children at once. Have one child at a time offer your puppy a treat. Once the treat is taken, the child can then gently pet the puppy. And, even if your dog appears great with kids, never leave him with a child under the age of eight without adult supervision.

OUT AND ABOUT

Help your puppy to generalize the experience of meeting and greeting different types of people – people who are tall, people with large feet, with beards, deep voices, accents and so on. You can do this by introducing the puppy to men and women of different ages, sizes, ethnicity and temperaments.

Years ago, one of my own dogs would lunge at people with large shoes. Clearly, he didn't get exposed early enough to people with large feet, which posed an unnecessary threat to him. People would laugh it off when he did this, but I would feel embarrassed and just a little scared that someday he would bite someone.

Remember, you're building a safety net for you and your dog. You want a dog that will feel comfortable in every situation – one that you will feel safe taking out with you to places and that will be safe and well-behaved at home when friends come to visit. Make sure you include disabled people, people with canes or in wheelchairs. One trip to the local senior center will address this. Include people wearing hats, uniforms and sunglasses, riding bikes and pushing baby carriages.

Most importantly, get your puppy comfortable with the person bringing the mail and delivering packages. Your postal carrier will be happy to make friends with your puppy early, while she's still sweet and lovable. If you can, be there the first time the postal carrier comes to the door and have that person feed your puppy a treat. Do it again every time you have a chance.

PUPPY KINDERGARTEN

A good Puppy Kindergarten Class will provide an unlimited number of socializing opportunities with adults, children and, of course, other dogs. In my puppy kindergarten class, I encourage people to bring children of all ages – including "grandparents" – and even to wear hats and funny sunglasses. During the early stages of class we play "pass the puppy," where the dogs get passed around the room and everyone gets a chance to hold and touch the puppy in preparation for visits to their veterinarians and groomers.

If this process appears too time intensive or involved, it really isn't. In the course of each day you probably have at least 10 to 15 experiences that you've shared with your puppy that included some type of socializing. You may also have passed up another handful of opportunities because you didn't think they were germane.

If you are an engaged and responsible puppy owner, you'll have a fully socialized puppy that is a pleasure to have with you at home or in public – one that is comfortable with all types of dogs, children, adults and situations. Remember, you can never socialize your dog too much or too often, even throughout adulthood. You'll be happy that you did, your dog will be happier and so will everyone else, with the one possible exception – the media hounds. They're the ones just waiting for the next story to write about "dogs gone bad!" Keep them at bay – socialize your puppy.

PICKING A REPUTABLE PUPPY KINDERGARTEN

- A certified trainer (certified through the Association of Pet Dog Trainers or through other organizations like the SPCA) with a behavioral science background – one that understands and can explain canine behavior in simple terms.
- A trainer who makes sure "socializing" is at the top of the list. Find out how socializing is addressed – there are a variety of exercises (like the ones described above) including scheduled play sessions throughout each class.
- A trainer who encourages "positive reinforcement" techniques – negative or punishing types of training methods with puppies are completely unnecessary and may, in fact, traumatize a young pup and create fear.
- A trainer with excellent communication skills who treats the owner with respect and compassion, not criticism.
- A class that includes Socializing, Basic Obedience, Canine Behavior (how dogs think and how to best communicate with them) and Attention and Focus Work (how to get and keep your dog's attention).
- Consistency – a class taught by one instructor throughout.
- A class that is taught in a private space, with plenty of room and no additional noise or distraction – and is kept scrupulously clean.
- Lastly, a class that's fun and upbeat. If you leave puppy class and you're not happy, there's something very wrong. Check out of that class and find one where you and your puppy leave with smiles on your faces. 🐾

For additional information or comments you may contact Deborah Rosen through her website at www.goodcitizen canine.com.