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*Strengthening the Human –  
Animal Connection*

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## **Puppy Socialization**

**American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior**

**www.AVSABonline.org**

The primary and most important time for puppy socialization is the first three months of life. During this time puppies should be exposed to as many new people, animals, stimuli and environments as can be achieved safely and without causing overstimulation manifested as excessive fear, withdrawal or avoidance behavior. For this reason, the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior believes that it should be the standard of care for puppies to receive such socialization before they are fully vaccinated.

Because the first three months are the period when sociability outweighs fear, this is the primary window of opportunity for puppies to adapt to new people, animals, and experiences. Incomplete or improper socialization during this important time can increase the risk of behavioral problems later in life including fear, avoidance, and/or aggression. Behavioral problems are the greatest threat to the owner-dog bond. In fact, behavioral problems are the number one cause of relinquishment to shelters. Behavioral issues, not infectious diseases, are the number one cause of death for dogs under three years of age.

While puppies' immune systems are still developing during these early months, the combination of maternal immunity, primary vaccination, and appropriate care makes the risk of infection relatively small compared to the chance of death from a behavior problem.

Veterinarians specializing in behavior recommend that owners take advantage of every safe opportunity to expose young puppies to the great variety of stimuli that they will experience in their lives. Enrolling in puppy classes prior to three months of age can be an excellent means of improving training, strengthening the human-animal bond, and socializing puppies in an environment where risk of illness can be minimized.

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**In general, puppies can start puppy socialization classes as early as 7-8 weeks of age. Puppies should receive a minimum of one set of vaccines at least 7 days prior to the first class and a first de-worming. They should be kept up-to-date on vaccines throughout the class.**

Socializing a new puppy is the most important thing you can do to create a wonderful dog. Many behavior problems in older dogs stem from the simple fact that the dog was not socialized as a puppy. It's easy, it's fun, and it's important!



Dogs have a natural period between 3-12 weeks of age when they are open to learning about their environment. This is an adaptive process that allows puppies to habituate to all the things they will normally encounter in their world. After this period is over they will often avoid novel things. Using their natural flight or fight response, they will try to increase the distance between themselves and anything they were not socialized to.

It is extremely important to introduce the puppy to as many different things (people, animals, sights, sounds, textures, etc) as possible during this socialization period. Because dogs do not generalize well, you should socialize your pup to as many things as possible.

**People:** women, men, teenagers, children, toddlers, babies, all races, peculiar gaits, uniforms, bearded men, people with hats, people acting weird, etc..

All the experiences with these people should be positive, using play or treats. A good suggestion is to have a "stranger treat bag" that you carry. Every time you meet someone new, ask that person to give your puppy a treat.

The puppy should also be exposed to being petted and handled by as many different people as possible.

**Situations:** crowds, kids on bikes, traffic, car rides, soccer games, different sounds, different floor textures, etc.

Again, make positive associations with all of these situations using food treats or play.

**Other animals:** especially other dogs, but also cats, squirrels, livestock, etc.

Exposing puppies to tons of different people, situations, and things in their environment will enable them to cope better with new experiences later in life.

Puppy classes are very helpful for socialization, but it's not enough to just go to class once a week for 5 weeks, you need to do more. An active approach of exposing the puppy to tons of things and making a positive association with them will reduce the risk of fearfulness and aggression in adulthood.