

Socialization

By Brenda Howard

You have probably heard the term “Socialized” in reference to dogs. What does it mean? A dictionary definition says that Socialize means to mix socially with others – to make someone behave in a way that is acceptable to others in their society.

So to socialize a dog is to make it behave or expect it to behave in an acceptable manner while in our company. We expect a well-socialized dog to behave according to our rules – our people rules. This includes everything from being friendly, but not TOO friendly to our guests to not using the inside of our homes as restrooms. A well-socialized dog is not fearful, timid, over reactive, or aggressive.

How do you achieve a socialized dog? It all starts with the genetic makeup of the dog’s family tree. There are certain breeds such as Chow dogs that are bred to be somewhat aloof. This is considered a correct temperament for a Chow. Rat Terriers are bred to be highly active and prey driven in order to be efficient ratters. Given that each breed will have a temperament based on it’s purpose (hunting, guarding, herding, etc.) you must start with an understanding of what should be that dog’s temperament or personality from it’s historic background. Once you understand the breed’s personality, you can do many things to assure the dog is well socialized.

Of course your job of socializing your dog will be much easier if you did your homework when you chose your puppy. You would have chosen a breed that is right for your family and would have visited the breeder and checked out he temperament of the dam and sire. If you adopted or rescued your dog you should check out the characteristics of it’s breed or breeds if it is a mix. The breeder should also have a good understanding of the importance exposing very young puppies to certain stressors such as being held, walking on various surfaces from slick to rough, loud noises, children, cats and other things most dogs will have to deal with once they are placed in their new homes.

Do not take a puppy before it is 7 weeks old for optimum success. Puppies learn extremely important doggie social skills by being with their litter and dam. Puppies removed too soon (prior to 7 weeks of age) often grow to be adult dogs that “do not play well with others.” Puppies learn bite inhibition, play behaviors, communication skills, and confidence from being with each other.

Introduce your new dog to many different sounds and sights. By exposing your dog to many different places and things, he will learn to be confident. When your dog experiences fearfulness at a new place, sound or thing resist the urge to comfort or baby him. Instead be calm and neutral in your response. This reaction from you will best help your dog understand that the new thing is not the boogey man. If you comfort him, he will believe he was correct in his fear!

Take your dog to a training class. Just because “Bowser” gets along well with the other dogs living at your house, does not mean he is socialized to dogs. A training class will help your dog in many ways

from learning more about being around dogs that are not in his family to behavior skills. Even if you have already taught your dog some basic obedience skills such as sit and down, your dog will benefit from being in a different place with different dogs. Dogs do not generalize information – meaning that a dog taught to sit at home will not immediately understand to sit when given the command in a strange place. This is why your dog may not sit for you when you ask him to in the lobby of the veterinarian’s office.

You are not doing your dog a favor by keeping him at home with you. Once your dog is fully inoculated for distemper, parvo and rabies (these are the minimum vaccines your dog will need) take him out and about. The more places you go, the more sights and smells your dog experiences - the more confident he will be.

If your dog gets car sick, which might make taking a ride less fun for both of you, try desensitizing him. On a nice day when you won’t overheat put your dog in the car – take a book or magazine and you both will sit in the car without it even moving. On the next day, do the same thing, but turn the engine on. You may want to do this several days or many days in a row. When you feel progress has been made, take the car on the road for a very short trip – may be to the corner and back or around the block. Slowly make the travel time in the car longer. Do not feed your dog the night before so that there will be less food on his stomach in the event of sickness. If you have given your dog plenty of time to overcome car sickness and you see no progress, consult your veterinarian who can prescribe medications to help with motion sickness.

If you feel your dog is shy, fearful, or aggressive at a level that concerns you consider consulting with a trainer or animal behaviorist who can evaluate your dog. Your veterinarian can rule out any medical reason that your dog may be behaving in a bad way.

Remember that as the person on one end of the leash, your job is to do all you can to help make your dog a happy healthy and enjoyable part of your world!

Brenda Howard has been training dogs for over 20 years and is a member of The Association of Pet Dog Trainers, The American Bloodhound Club, The Basset Hound Club of America and The Pet Care Services Association (formerly the ABKA).

The information presented here is not intended to substitute for the advice and care of a veterinarian. Consult your veterinarian regarding all issues relating to your dog’s health.

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