

Pawsitive Results Critter Academy

Where people learn to lead...and pets love to follow!

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What Puppies Need

Socialization Means Positive Experiences

The importance of puppy socialization is well documented in the scientific literature (for more information, see ‘Genetics and the Social Behavior of the Dog’ by Scott and Fuller). Socialization means insuring that puppies have POSITIVE experiences with all of the things they need to be comfortable with as an adult. The critical socialization period for puppies is from 3 to 16 weeks of age, with their ability to accept new experiences greatly declining after this time. Puppies learn more during this time than they do during the rest of their lives, and experiences during this period set the foundation on which later learning is built. A puppy’s socialization needs to include fun experiences with a variety of objects, sounds, people, other animals, surfaces, and environmental conditions. A puppy’s learning tends to be very location-specific, so socialization (especially to dogs and people) needs to occur both at home and away from home. Remember, socialization means developing positive associations through POSITIVE experiences. Pairing socialization with lots of praise, play, and treats can insure that these memories get stored in the pup’s “good stuff” file. A pup with lots of positive experiences has a strong buffer against the occasional bad experience life may throw his way.

If your puppy shows any reluctance to greet or investigate, let him proceed at his own pace. Pushing a puppy into an experience to show him that it is OK can create a negative experience the pup won’t forget. Even if the situation seems benign to you, it is important to respect your puppy’s feelings and work through them with patience. Puppies can become overwhelmed if they are exposed to too many experiences too quickly, so be sure to give your puppy time to process what she has learned before moving on to the next experience. Also, over-tired puppies can become cranky, so be sure to provide plenty of rest in between socialization experiences and prevent overhandling, especially by children.

Puppies learn to relate to and interact appropriately with different species (people, cats, and also other dogs) by having positive experiences with them. If puppies are not exposed to people and other dogs by 14 weeks of age, then they will never be completely comfortable with them. Even if your puppy is comfortable with you and your other pets, she may not be comfortable with anyone outside the family. Puppies that only meet other dogs of the same breed tend to be uncomfortable with other breeds, so within-litter socialization is not enough to insure your pup will be good with all dogs. Adult dogs play differently than puppies, and playing only with adult dogs can actually result in the development of inappropriate play behaviors that continue into adulthood. So, the bottom line is that if you want your puppy to be social with other dogs, then he needs to meet a variety of other puppies before 14 weeks of age. Please be sure that your puppy is meeting healthy puppies that are on a regular vaccination schedule and have been checked by a veterinarian. A well-run puppy socialization and training class can provide a safe place for your puppy to meet new people and puppies. The instructor can also help you with puppy behavior challenges and show you how to start your puppy’s basic training.

Training Puppies with Positive Methods

Some people may tell you to start training at 6 months of age and to “just let him be a puppy” until then. I certainly agree that 6 month olds need to be in training, but you are doing the dog (and yourself!) a great disservice by waiting until then to start. Young puppies are information sponges that are quick to learn behaviors such as sit, down, come, off, and not pulling on leash. Puppies must be trained using gentle, reward-based methods both to prevent injury and to insure a positive association with the experience of training. By teaching these concepts early, you are setting your puppy up for success later. If you do not introduce your puppy to the general concepts of self control, polite greetings, earning what you want through good behavior, and looking to people for permission before acting, then you are setting your puppy up for confusion and frustration when the rules suddenly change at 6 months of age.

Some other important lessons for young puppies to learn:

- **Willingly release objects to people**
- **Comfort with restraint and handling**
- **Accepting people around their food bowl**
- **What to chew on**
- **How to spend time alone**
- **Where to go potty**

Remember, these need to be positive training experiences. Teach your puppy that good things happen (like great treats) when he goes potty outside, gives objects to people, and remains calm while his feet are handled. Toss a few treats into your puppy’s bowl while he is eating. Supervise your puppy, provide lots of great chews, and pick up objects you don’t want him to have to prevent your puppy from making mistakes and learning bad habits. Gradually introduce your puppy to time alone, being sure to leave him in a safe place with lots of fun activities to keep him occupied. “Busy toys” that you can fill with food or treats are a great way to keep a puppy happy and out of trouble when alone.

A very important lesson for puppies to learn is how to use their mouths gently. This is called bite inhibition. By regularly using her mouth in play with people and other puppies, your puppy can learn to control her jaw strength. Playing only with adult dogs can teach puppies to bite hard because adults tend to be less sensitive than puppies so don’t always react to a puppy’s hard bites by ending play. If your puppy puts his mouth on you gently, calmly redirect his biting onto an appropriate toy. If your puppy bites hard, say “OW!”, and immediately stop all interaction with him for about 30 seconds. DO NOT physically correct your puppy by holding his mouth closed or pinning him down. This can teach a puppy that his rough play gets you to play rough, or can scare the puppy into not biting at all, which prevents him from practicing mouth control and can result in hard bites later in life.

Warning Signs

If your puppy has any of the following problems, please seek professional help right away: uncomfortable with dogs or people (or some people, such as men or children), hiding with chews or toys, spending a lot of time under furniture, fighting against gentle restraint or handling, not comfortable with people around the food bowl, difficult to groom, or not housetrained by 5 months old. These are not normal behaviors for a puppy, and are signs of greater trouble to come when he becomes an adolescent or adult. The best chance of resolving these issues is to address them early!

Laurel Scarioni offers group classes for puppies and adult dogs, as well as private lessons for behavior problems and obedience training. For more information, call me at (707) 292-5862 or check out my website at www.pawsitiveresults.net.