

Safe Socialization and Exposure



Socialization is for every dog!

Every dog, from young puppies to adult dogs alike need proper socialization and exposure to a wide variety of sights and sounds. Young puppies experience a highly impressionable period of time early in life between the ages of 8 weeks and 14-16 weeks. During this time, a lack of sufficient exposure or going through traumatic situations can have long-lasting effects. Adult dogs benefit from continued exposure to every-day situations in order for them to continue to remain comfortable in their environment.

The basic protocol

So, what is the best approach to socialization and exposure? There are a few things to consider, however the main objective is to keep your dog's emotional state in mind. This means doing all you can to ensure a safe and positive experience while they are exposed to new situations. Maintaining a safe distance away from new sights and sounds in the early stages can prevent your puppy or adult dog from becoming overwhelmed or over stimulated.

The goal with socialization and exposure is to pair something that your dog likes with a new sight or sound. Food can be very useful with this process and should be used liberally especially with young puppies. A favorite toy can also help and of course plenty of calm and reassuring verbal praise.

During walks, be ready to quickly offer your dog a tasty treat or a fun toy the moment they notice a challenging distraction. This can include seeing people walking or jogging, pushing strollers, kids on bikes, other dogs, etc. Continue to offer this reinforcement until they can resume the walk.

Learning to disengage

One very important aspect to all of this is to teach your dog to disengage from everyday distractions. This means teaching them to redirect their attention onto you. Although they will come across new environmental distractions, the attention should mostly be on you for reassurance and guidance.

A great exercise to practice at home is a basic engagement behavior. Hold a treat by your dog's nose, then quickly move it up towards your face. Offer the treat and plenty of verbal praise when your dog makes direct eye contact. When your dog can do this reliably, add a verbal cue like "look at me!" or "focus!" Put it all together by saying the verbal cue and reinforcing when a distraction is present during walks.

Socialization and exposure for social butterflies!

Dogs and puppies that want to greet every person and dog that they come across must first learn to wait for permission. Cute as they may be, not every person or dog will want to interact with your buddy. Teaching them to wait for permission is a great way to teach self control.

When a distraction is present, shorten the leash and offer a treat or toy. If your dog ignores what you're offering, try moving away from the distraction. The goal here is to keep them from rehearsing impulsive behaviors. If they relax and are able to redirect their attention onto you, you may then give them permission to go say hello if the other person or dog wants to interact.

Socialization and exposure for shy and cautious dogs

If your new puppy or adult dog seems a little reserved or even fearful around new distractions, you will need to take things a little slower. When a dog is actively showing signs of fear towards something new, they are too stressed and are unable to learn or make positive associations.

Keeping a safe distance from new and challenging distractions is vital to ensure that your dog's stress level remains low or manageable. These puppies and adult dogs will benefit from learning to engage with you following the process described above. Ensuring that they get adequate amounts of good restful sleep and exercising in a quiet environment can also help with stress management.

Shy and cautious dogs can take a longer amount of time to adjust to new and challenging situations. Take it slow and always be ready to provide relief and a chance to decompress by bringing them indoors where feel safe and comfortable.

Socialization and exposure during the Covid-19 pandemic

During these stressful times, it is still possible to expose your dog to a wide variety of sights and sounds. Parks can offer plenty of space and distractions while allowing you to maintain a safe distance. You can also visit a busy shopping area and remain in your vehicle. Offer a treat and verbal praise when your dog sees people walking by or hears the sounds of cars and trucks. Indoors, you can provide plenty of exposure by playing videos with nature and city sounds. YouTube is a great resource for this. Start with these videos at a low volume while you play with your dog and gradually increase the volume over time.

Remember that socialization and exposure is an on-going process and a vital part to raising a happy dog.