

# Socializing Your Dog

**Socialization is defined as the process of learning to behave in a way that is acceptable or the activity of mixing socially with others. If your dog has an unwanted behavior during socialization such as fear, anxiety, or aggression, stop reading and reach out to a professional trainer or certified behavior specialist. Dogs that are exposed to an experience or interaction for the first time will need to learn what behaviors are acceptable and desired. If your dog is having trouble with socialization contact a behavior specialist before proceeding.**

## Start Early

The best time to socialize your dog is when they are under 16 weeks of age. During that time their brain is still developing and they are learning new ways to interact with their environment.

Social interactions with familiar people and animals are the safest ways to socialize your adult dog. When you are planning social events for your dog you need to be able to predict how your dog is going to behave and how any other people or animals are going to behave. If you are not clear on any of these things, STOP and get more information before continuing.

## Take it One Step at a Time

Ideally you will only introduce your dog to one new thing at a time. This could include introducing to one dog, one new person, or a new restaurant with a dog friendly patio. If there is a chance that the one new thing will include several other new things (such as a dog friendly patio + 2 new dogs + 5 new people that want to pet your dog + the sound of traffic passing nearby) then spend more time socializing your dog to each one of these things in separate individual sessions before combining them all together. Exposing your dog to more in a short period of time will result in "trigger stacking" which results in increased anxiety and lowers your dog's threshold for coping.

## Setting Your Dog Up for Success

Dogs need to have a set of foundational skills to help them remain under threshold when exposed to something that can cause them to become unstable and unfocused. Foundation skills are skills that you have taught your dog that they can perform in any environment. They might include hand targeting, sit calmly without pulling, whining or barking, relaxing on a mat, etc. Without foundational skills to rely on you risk your dog reacting negatively in situations where they cannot be redirected to a foundation behavior as an acceptable alternative.

## Be Prepared to Leave the Situation

Socialization should be about your dog and what they enjoy. Many times when attempting to socialize our dogs, we forget about their needs. For example, taking a dog to a group obedience class where the other participants are attempting to learn basic manners while your dog is shivering in fear or barking and lunging at the end of the leash towards the other animals is a sign that your dog is uncomfortable in that environment (it is also extremely distracting for the other participants of the class). Before you take your dog into a situation to socialize them, plan your escape route to provide them relief from the situation causing them to behave poorly prior to the trip.

## Choose Your Location & Time Wisely

In some situations, you can change the time of day that you choose to socialize your dog. With many people working during the week, some places have less traffic and therefore make it safer for your dog to be exposed to new things. If bicycles scare your dog, a biking trail on a busy weekend may be a bad idea but the same trail mid-week may be a safer and quieter compromise for exposure.

## Never Force the Situation

If a dog chooses not to interact they may be trying to communicate that they are uncomfortable. Some owners will attempt to use food to lure the dog closer to something that the dog has chosen to not interact with. This can lead to danger for the dog and anyone else involved since after the dog has eaten the food they may find themselves too close to something scary or overwhelming and rather than moving away they may feel their only option is to defend themselves.

Although this list is not all inclusive, it will get you started to setting up your dog for successful social outings.