

Socialization for Dogs

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 contact Pet University to schedule a private lesson with a 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.

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. More information on [Puppy Socialization and Development](#).

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.

Ask yourself the following questions before attempting to socialize your adult dog.

1. What is the new thing that is being introduced?

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



Additional Resources

Please contact our Behavior Team to speak with a skilled behavior specialist.

BehaviorTeam@spca.org

214-461-5169

www.spca.org/petuniversity

Socializing an adult dog to learn how to deal with new scenarios is time consuming and must be handled with care. See more information in the article "[Don't Socialize the Dog](#)" by Laura VanArendonk Baugh, CPDT, KPA-CTP

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.

2. What behaviors does your dog know that will help him in this new scenario?

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 he 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 he cannot be redirected to a foundation behavior as an acceptable alternative.

3. What is the dog's escape option if he feels uncomfortable? Are you prepared to leave if you are unable to create a positive experience for the dog or something in the environment changes and makes your dog so uncomfortable that they choose to leave?

Socialization should be about your dog and what he enjoys. 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 him, plan your escape route to provide him relief from the situation causing him to behave poorly prior to the trip.

4. What precautions will you take to keep your dog safe?

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.

5. What are you going to do if your dog chooses not to interact?

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.