

SUPER-SOCIALIZED

By Pat Miller

There was once a time when you rarely encountered the word “socialization” in dog circles. Today it’s the new training buzzword; if you haven’t heard it at least three dozen times by the time your dog is a dozen weeks old, you and your puppy must be living in a cave.

A half-century ago, no one talked about socialization because they didn’t need to. For the most part dogs wandered freely in their neighborhoods, accompanied kids to the school bus stop, hung out with canine pals all day, and became naturally socialized to their world and the people, dogs and things they encountered in their daily travels. Sure, they got into occasional scuffles amongst themselves, but they sorted it out. Sure, a kid was bitten every now and then, but it was no big deal. Sure, dogs got hit by cars from time to time, but that was part of life. Sad, but one could always find another dog. Hopefully the next one would be smart enough to stay out of the road.

Today a large segment of our pet owning population is made up of more responsible canine guardians and caretakers. A nationwide paradigm shift has changed our attitudes about our dogs. No longer just “pets,” many of our beloved four-legged family members are kept inside our homes and in safely fenced yards, supervised closely when around children, and only encounter other dogs under controlled conditions – at training class, maybe during a brief on-leash greeting, during scheduled play dates, and perhaps at the dog park. The thought of our beloved dogs running free in the streets gives us heart palpitations, and we grieve terribly whenever we lose one.

On the plus side, this means our dogs live longer, physically healthier lives. On the minus side, it means they no longer benefit from the natural socialization process that occurred when they were allowed to explore their world and figure out how things

work on their own. As a result, we've spawned a whole new behavior problem: undersocialization.

What Is Socialization?

Socialization is really classical conditioning – creating an association between two stimuli. Behavioral scientists have identified the period from four to fourteen weeks as the most important socialization window for a puppy. After the age of fourteen weeks that window starts to close, and it closes pretty quickly. If a pup is super-socialized during this important developmental period he'll most likely believe the world is a safe and happy place. If he's not well-socialized, he's likely to be neophobic, which means fearful of new things. This is a common condition in dogs rescued from puppy mills and hoarder situations. (See WDJ April 2007, Fear Itself) Not only is it challenging to own and train a dog who is afraid of everything new he encounters, but the neophobic canine is also a strong candidate for developing fear-related aggression.

Lack of exposure is one cause of undersocialization. Inappropriate exposure is another. If you're not careful during your socialization efforts you may inadvertently set your pup up to create negative associations. In that case you can actually sensitize your pup to the things you're introducing him to – that is, you can make him afraid of them – the exact opposite of the outcome you want.

Think of the well-meaning soccer mom who takes the family's brand-new nine-week old Portuguese Water Pup to watch her son's team practice. The entire team suddenly spies the adorable fluffball and charges toward mom to oogle over him. The terrified puppy screams, pees, and tries to run away when he sees a dozen giant human creatures coming toward him at a dead run. He can't escape; he's trapped by the leash, which panics him even more. Mom sees the pup flailing at the end of the leash and scoops him up in her arms to calm him so the boys can pet him. Now he's even more trapped! One boy reaches to pat him on the head, and the pup, thinking he may be about to die, as a last resort snaps at the lowering hand that appears poised to grab him. The boy yanks his hand away, and mom scolds the puppy for being "bad."

How much worse could it get? This puppy now has an extreme fear of children, especially boys, thanks to at least three negative classical associations in rapid succession:

1. Boys/children are scary; they run toward you in large packs.
2. Boys/children are scary; they try to grab your head.
3. Boys/children make bad things happen – when they are near mom becomes violent.

The pup may also have developed negative associations with the collar and leash, wide open fields, being picked up, and mom. In addition, he learned one important

operant lesson – snapping is a successful behavioral strategy for making scary hands go away. Not the lessons we want a young pup to learn!

The bad news is the puppy is now “not good with children” and a “fear-biter.” While we often talk about how slow dogs can be to generalize operantly conditioned behaviors (if I do “x” I can make “y” happen), classically conditioned associations, especially those that produce strong emotions, are great candidates for “one-time learning experiences.”

The good news is that at nine weeks this pup’s socialization window is still wide open, and if his owner is smart she has time to repair the damage. The other bad news is that most owners don’t realize the importance of taking immediate steps to change a pup’s association if he has a bad experience at a young age. They think “tincture of time” will fix it – that he’ll grow out of it. He won’t. Or they think having the soccer team feed him cookies once a week will make him love them. It won’t.

So, socialization is the process of giving a puppy positive associations with the people, places and things in his world. You need to be sure he’s having a great time, playing fun games, getting good stuff, and protected from scary stuff while you’re teaching him that the world is a safe and happy place.

Early Days

If you bring your new pup home when he’s eight weeks old, four weeks of his ten prime socialization weeks are already gone. Since a quarter to a half or more of a pup’s most important socialization time has passed by the time he leaves his mum and moves into his forever home, it’s vitally important that breeders invest time and energy into socializing their litters. This includes having the pups walk and play on different substrates – grass, gravel, cement, carpeting, vinyl; inviting lots of different kinds of people over to play with and handle the pups; exposing them to household objects and sounds – microwave, telephone, television, vacuum cleaner; and making sure the baby dogs have positive associations with all these things. Sadly, a small minority of breeders do a really good job of it, which contributes significantly to the population of undersocialized dogs in our world.

If the breeder of your pup did, then your pup is already well-started on his super-socialization program. Now it’s your responsibility to keep it up. If your pup comes to you from a socially impoverished environment, you’ll already see the signs of neophobia. You have no time to lose, and you may never be able to make up all the ground he’s lost, but you can make him better than he’d be otherwise. Trainers talk about giving pups “100 new (positive) exposures in the first 100 days.” (See Sidebar: 100 Exposures). If your pup is already showing signs of timidity or fear, triple that to 300 exposures in 100 days. And get busy!

Playing in the Gene Pool

Speaking of breeders, let's talk about the role of genetics on behavior and socialization. Behavior is always a combination of genetics and environment. Nature and nurture. Always.

Genes dictate how easily reinforced a dog is for the things the environment tosses at him during his lifetime. Hence a dog who is genetically programmed to be reinforced by chasing things that move becomes a good herding dog, fox hound or ratter. The difference is the herding dog is (hopefully) not programmed to be reinforced by killing the things he chases, while the hound and the terrier are.

So, if you have a pup who is genetically programmed to be reinforced for the consequences of acting behaviorally bold he's naturally easier to socialize, even if his first few weeks were skimpy, than one who is genetically programmed to be reinforced for the results of acting timid or fearful. How do you know which behavioral genes your pup has for social behavior? You really don't. It's useful to see your pup's parents – at least the mom, if at all possible. If mom is timid or aggressive there's a good chance her pups will be too. The pups' behavior still can't be attributed solely to genes – pups can learn fearful or aggressive behavior by watching their mom's response to humans and other environmental stimuli – a behavioral phenomenon known as social facilitation. If you've been paying attention you'll remember that genes and environment both play a role in behavior. Always.

Anyway, you might be adopting your pup from a shelter or from rescue, and you'll never see mom or dad, so you don't get any hints about their behavior. How do you know how much socialization your pup needs to overcome any genetic weakness in temperament? You don't. But you don't need to. The answer to the genetic mystery is to super-socialize every single puppy, regardless of what you think you know, or don't know, about his genetics. If you do that, you're guaranteed to help your pup be everything he can socially be.

There's no such thing as overkill when it comes to properly-done socialization. You can't do too much. Pups who are super-socialized tend to assume that new things they meet later in life are safe and good until proven otherwise. Dogs who are very well-socialized as pups are the ones least likely to develop aggressive behaviors in their lifetimes. Pups who aren't well-socialized tend to be suspicious and fearful of new things they meet

throughout their lives, and are most likely to eventually bite someone. You'd better get out there and get started – time's a-wastin'!

SIDEBAR: 100 EXPOSURES IN 100 DAYS

Giving your pup 100 positive experiences in his first 100 days with you is not as daunting as it may sound. You'll find many opportunities in your own

neighborhood to start your list of 100. You'll also want to get into the habit of taking your pup with you to as many safe places as possible, to enhance his socialization, and to start him on his path to being your well-behaved companion, welcome wherever you go.

We suggest you keep an actual written list of your pup's socialization exposures, with a goal of a minimum of one new exposure per day until you've reached the 100 mark. If you put a little effort into it, we're betting you'll get there well before your 100 days are up – more likely in half that time!

Here are some suggestions to start you off:

1. Your mail carrier. Snag him on his daily rounds and ask him to feed your pup a tidbit or two. Start an early positive association with this daily visitor to your home
2. Your UPS or FedEx person. Add a little extra power to the positive association with uniforms to avoid trouble later.
3. Your neighbors. Actually, this can count as several, if you live in a diverse neighborhood. If your neighborhood is homogenous, try a park, or the bench in front of your local library: Tall men,
4. short men,
5. tall women,
6. short women,
7. skinny men and
8. skinny women,
9. portly men and
10. portly women,
11. babes-in-arms,
12. babies in strollers,
13. women pushing babies in strollers
14. toddlers,
15. children,
16. tweens and
17. teens.

18. Men with beards.
 19. Men with hats
 20. Kids with backpacks.
 21. Women with hats
 22. People in wheelchairs
 23. People on walkers and crutches
 24. Kids on bikes
 25. Kids on skateboards
 26. People with umbrellas
 27. Kids playing basketball...
- ...and all of the above in various ethnic groups. Then add locations to your list:
28. Your bank
 29. Vet office
 30. Pet supply store
 31. Copy center
 32. Hardware store
 33. Puppy kindergarten class
 34. On-leash park
 35. Any place of business that doesn't say "No Dogs" on the door.

Okay – you're one-third of the way there. You get to think up the rest. Happy socializing!

SIDEBAR: PLACES NOT TO TAKE YOUR PUP

While socialization is a wonderful thing, it's important to avoid places that pose a risk to your pup's physical and mental health and safety. Here are some important places to avoid:

1. Off-leash dog parks, until he is fully vaccinated
2. Any place where he is likely to encounter stray dogs
3. Any place where he is likely to encounter sick dogs
4. Any place where he is likely to encounter aggressive dogs
5. Any place where he is likely to encounter aggressive/rowdy/drunk humans
6. Accumulations of feces from unknown dogs
7. Any place he is not welcome
8. Any place where he would have to be left unattended, or in a hot car (no tying up outside the grocery store!)
9. Any place where he will be uncomfortable (sitting in the full sun while you watch your son's Little League game.
10. Any place where you won't be able to devote enough attention to him to ensure his safety, security and well being.

SIDEBAR: PUPPY CLASSES

A well-run puppy class is one of the best places to find lots of positive socialization opportunities. Unfortunately, because of their fear of disease transmission, some veterinarians still caution their puppy client owners to keep their young canines safely at home until fully vaccinated, or at the very least until they have received a minimum of two shots, usually by the age of 12 weeks. Twelve weeks leaves only two weeks of critical socialization time – assuming there's a class starting up immediately after the pup receives his second shot. Not good enough!

We asked longtime positive trainer Gail Fisher of All Dog's Gym in Manchester, New Hampshire, to share her experiences with and thoughts on puppy classes. Here's her response:

Regarding the question of puppy socialization versus risk of illness, we have been running puppy classes and play sessions for puppies as young as eight weeks since 1976 (which, incidentally, was before Parvo!) In all this time, we have had a total of three puppies in our classes that were diagnosed with Parvo (or anything worse than canine cough – a mild upper respiratory infection similar to the common cold).

The first was a five-month-old Rottweiler (a breed known for having immunological issues -- and beyond the age of a typical "puppy" class). The second was a puppy from a breeder that had been in its new home for two weeks and who had received two shots, and the third was a pet shop puppy that had been purchased two days before starting class.

More importantly, however, is the fact that no other puppies in any of those classes got sick. As soon as we heard from the owners of the sick puppies, we immediately contacted every other puppy owner to tell them to check with their veterinarian for advice on whether to have an additional inoculation. Some did, some didn't -- but no one else got sick.

So if you're looking for "odds" -- in 33 years, figure (conservatively) 100 puppies a year . . . over 3,000 puppies, the odds of a puppy getting sick from a well-run training class is virtually nil (less than 1/100th percent). The risks of illness are, in my opinion, negligible, while on the other hand, the advantages to socialization are unmeasurable. Hope this helps in your decision to take your puppy to training class.

Gail Fisher

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WHAT YOU CAN DO

1. Have a concrete socialization plan in place when you prepare to adopt your next puppy. Make a commitment to follow through with your plan – and then do it.

2. Let friends and relatives know about the importance of socialization so their next pups get the full benefit of a solid socialization foundation.
3. Sign your pup up for a good positive puppy class – a great place to expose him to good socialization experiences.
4. If you have a poorly socialized puppy or adult dog, seek the assistance of a qualified, positive behavior consultant to help you implement a plan for remedial socialization. Also, read Patricia McConnell's *The Cautious Canine* and Nicole Wilde's *Help For Your Fearful Dog*.

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Pat Miller is a Certified Behavior Consultant, Canine (KA), Certified Professional Dog Trainer (KA), past president of the Association of Professional Dog Trainers (US) and past board member of the Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers. Miller worked at the Marin Humane Society in Novato, California from 1976 to 1996, first as a volunteer, then in customer service, as a humane officer, Customer Service Supervisor, Field Supervisor, and for the final ten years as Director of Operations. During this time, she obtained an Associate Degree in Administration of Justice and a BS in Business Administration. In 1996 Miller left the Humane Society to launch Peaceable Paws in Monterey, California.

Miller now offers group good manners classes, private training and behavior modification services, dog training workshops and trainer academies at her Peaceable Paws 80-acre training facility in Fairplay, Maryland, where she and her husband Paul live with their three dogs, eight cats, four horses, five chickens, and a pot-bellied pig. In addition, Miller presents seminars and workshops around the world on a variety of training and behavior topics. She has authored seven books on dog behavior and training: "The Power of Positive Dog Training," "Positive Perspectives," "Positive Perspectives 2," "Play With Your Dog," "Do-Over Dogs," "How to Foster Dogs" and "Beware of the Dog." Miller is training editor for *The Whole Dog Journal*, and also writes for several other publications, www.peaceablepaws.com

In May of 2015, Pat was named by Dog Fancy Magazine as one of 45 people who have changed the dog world.