

This Fills Animal Shelters, Avoid This Mistake to Save Your Pet

It's such an extreme problem, it's keeping animal shelters and rescue facilities filled in every city and state across the country. Many pet owners just don't realize how this issue can balloon into a situation where you're forced to relinquish your beloved pet.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Puppies need to be well-socialized in order to grow into confident, balanced adult dogs
- Puppies who aren't properly socialized during their first 3 months are at an especially high risk for behavior problems
- Secrets to a well-adjusted puppy include helping him get comfortable being handled and exposing him to new people, animals, places, situations, sights and sounds
- Socialization should continue throughout your pet's life, using tools such as obedience classes, play dates with friendly dogs, agility or other dog-centric activities, and therapy dog training
- Never underestimate the socialization value of regular daily walks with your dog. You both get fresh air, stress relief, perhaps some aerobic exercise, and opportunities to encounter old and new two- and four-legged friends

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Puppies, like children, can't grow into healthy adults without our help and guidance. Good puppies aren't born; they're made. **Puppies go through several development stages** on the road to maturity:

- Between 4 and 8+ weeks, puppies learn how to interact with other dogs
- Between 5 and 10+ weeks, they develop skills necessary to interact with humans
- Between 5 and 16 weeks, they are most open to investigating new environments and stimuli; puppies not given a full range of socialization opportunities by about 10 weeks can develop fear of the unfamiliar

It's the responsibility of the humans caring for puppies to take maximum advantage of each sensitive stage by providing age-appropriate social and learning opportunities.

Puppies who aren't properly socialized during their first 3 months are at dramatically increased risk for behavior problems like aggression, fear and avoidance. Dogs with problems stemming from lack of early socialization fill animal shelters and rescue facilities in every city and state across the country.

Veterinarian Dr. Kathryn Primm, writing for veterinary journal dvm360, offers five secrets to a well-adjusted puppy, and this caution: "Don't force things! Make sure these exposures are done in a way that's comfortable for the puppy. Don't keep exposing a puppy to a new experience if the dog is scared. Talk to your veterinarian for guidance."¹

5 Secrets to a Well-Adjusted Puppy

(Dr. Primm's comments are in italics.)

1. **Handle your puppy — literally**

"Make a point to touch your puppy all over. Don't ever be forceful or push to the point of struggle. Just touch and hold gently and reward his acceptance with a special treat. Remember, over time, you'll need to be able to trim toenails, clean ears and brush teeth. If your new puppy actually enjoys these rituals, life is better for you both (not to mention your veterinarian, groomer, trainer, pet sitter and anyone else who will care for your dog during his lifetime)."

2. **Socialize with your puppy**

"Let your puppy meet people of all shapes, sizes and mannerisms to learn there's nothing to fear from people of all kinds. Introduce children, men and women, and even people with hats or costumes — Halloween comes around once a year. Don't forget the treats to make 'scary' fun!"

A good guideline to follow is that in your puppy's first two months with you, she should:

- Be introduced to as many healthy and safe people, animals, places, situations, sights and sounds as possible
- Be encouraged to explore and investigate her environment, with supervision
- Be exposed to lots of toys, games, surfaces and other stimuli
- Take daily car rides with you to new, unfamiliar environments

3. **Play dress-up with your puppy**

"If your dog is ever going to need a sweater or coat — or even a bandage — now's the time to teach him about them. Even if you just tie an adult T-shirt around him and let him get used to the feeling, it's an investment in his future."

"Best of all, if you can help your new puppy learn about an E-collar — like those cones and collars the veterinarian will use when your furry friend recovers from surgery or illness — your veterinary team will really appreciate it. Someday your grown-up puppy won't be as freaked out when he needs to wear one to save his life."

4. **Make noise with your puppy**

"Expose your pup to loud noises and novel objects, like the vacuum cleaner, the doorbell and even suddenly rattling a can with coins. Show that these things aren't harmful and reward her only when she's calm. Startling at a loud noise is typical, but your puppy can learn there's nothing to fear and recover quickly from a startle. Noise phobias are real, and you can do your part to prevent them."

The development of a phobia involves a complex molecular change that isn't well understood, but seems to involve a shift in how an affected dog processes information. It's also important to note that noise phobia can be inherited, so it's possible for a pup to be predisposed to the condition if dogs in his lineage have displayed overreaction to noise.²

The genetic connection is so direct that if one of your dog's parents overreacted to storms or other noises, you can reasonably expect your pet will have a similar response.

The problem is also known to be especially common in herding breeds, and an overreaction to loud noises can predispose a dog to other panic disorders like separation anxiety, as well as behavioral problems. You can find a detailed discussion of canine noise phobia, including tips on [**how to calm your dog here**](#).

5. **Adventure with your puppy**

"You and your pup will experience all life has to offer together, but the experiences won't be as fun if your puppy is afraid or difficult to handle. Take your puppy everywhere you can for exposure to new places. Visit your veterinarian on a day just for a visit — and some friendly treats.

Take the puppy on errands to see lots of new sights and smell new smells. Make all the places that you go extra special with great treats or repeat the visits until they're so normal that your pup is bored with them.

Science shows that it's easier for brains to remember bad experiences than good ones, so make sure your foundation for your puppy's brain is filled with terrific associations. You can avoid big problems in the future and, let's face it, handling and spending time with your puppy is a ton of fun!"

Socialization Should Continue Throughout Your Pup's Life

Once your immediate **puppy socialization** tasks are complete and your dog is on her way to becoming a well-balanced adult, it's important to continue to offer her opportunities for new experiences, socialization and training for the rest of her life.

Even dogs well-socialized as puppies, if not given regular opportunities to interact with other dogs as adults, can lose their ability to mix comfortably with others of their species. And while some pets are naturally skilled at dog-to-dog dealings, many others need regular practice through activities that provide the chance to socialize with unfamiliar people and pets.

6 Socialization Tips for Adult Dogs

- Obedience classes provide an environment where all the dogs are kept under control. This can be very helpful if your pet seems wary or fearful around other dogs. Organized classes give him the opportunity to be around other pups, but from a slight distance.
- If you have friends with dogs, arrange play dates with one compatible dog at a time. Put your dog and his pal in a safe, enclosed area and let them get to know each other. This is a nice low-pressure social situation in which your pup can hone his skills without being overwhelmed by too many dogs, or an overly dominant dog.

If things go well, you can arrange future outings for the four of you to take walks or hikes, toss Frisbees, fetch tennis balls, go swimming, etc.

- If it makes sense for you and your dog, get involved in dog agility competitions. These events provide a great opportunity for your dog to be around other dogs and people while getting lots of exercise, mental stimulation and shared time with you.
- If agility isn't appealing, there are lots of other activities that might be, including flying disc, dock jumping/dock diving, flyball, flygility, herding, hunt and field trials, musical freestyle and **nose work**, to name just a few. Dogplay is a good resource for exploring organized exercise and socialization possibilities for your dog.
- Another wonderful socialization activity you can share with your pet, depending on his temperament and personality, is training to be an emotional support dog for pet therapy programs. These dogs and their owners visit hospitals, nursing homes, detention units, rehab facilities, certain schools, senior citizen apartments and other places where people aren't permitted to keep pets or aren't able to care for them.
- Finally, never underestimate the socialization value of regular **daily walks with your dog**. You both get fresh air, stress relief, perhaps some aerobic exercise, and opportunities to encounter old and new two- and four-legged friends.

Sources and References

[dvm360 January 3, 2018](#)

¹ [5 Secrets to a Well-Adjusted New Puppy](#).

² [dvm360 December 1, 2010](#)
