

# Socialising your Puppy

This handout was written by *Ann Ellmers-Kenny, of Blue Ash Dog Training* and peer-reviewed by an independent vet consultant. The intention of this handout is to explain what socialisation means and it should be read in conjunction with the AVSAB (American Veterinary Society of Animal Behaviour) Position Statement on Puppy Socialisation which you can download at [www.AVSAB.org](http://www.AVSAB.org)

Many vets and people taking Puppy Pre-School classes will tell you that you must not take your puppies out until 10 days after they have had their final vaccination jab. At the heart of these people is the concern that your puppy may pick up the truly distressing disease Parvovirus & Leptospirosis, among other things such as Canine Kennel Cough, which can also be distressing for young pups. Parvo, and its cousin Distemper, are simply awful diseases to watch any puppy or dog suffer and it is true you must be careful with your young pup. As a dog trainer and a dog minder I can tell you that more dogs die from being poorly or under socialised than they do from preventable diseases. Beginning the process of teaching your new young puppy how to cope in the big wide world needs to start as soon as possible. There is a valuable window of learning opportunity in every dog, which unfortunately coincides with the vaccination schedule. It is this period from about 6 to 14 weeks (recent studies suggest that for some breeds, like GSDs it is 4-14 weeks) where a puppy has his best chance of learning to become a confident and resilient dog (often referred to as a "fear period"). There are other stages and periods, but we are dealing with this one in this document.

## What is Socialisation?

Socialisation is the art of teaching your new young pup that all the things he encounters in his life are unlikely to hurt or affect him in any kind of adverse way.

**Socialisation is:** Learning to watch the world go past without needing to be involved in every aspect of it

**Socialisation is:** Learning that there are all different kinds of people in the world, most of whom are to be ignored

**Socialisation is:** Learning that there are all different kinds of animals in the world, most of whom are to be ignored

**Socialisation is:** Learning that there are all different kinds of things-that-make-noise in the world, most of which should be ignored

**Socialisation is:** Learning that there are all different kinds and shapes and colours of dogs in the world, and most of them can be ignored too!

## What is NOT socialisation?

**Socialisation is not:** Going to a park and letting your dog off lead without having first taught it to come back when called (and/or then allow it to run up to other dogs who are on lead)

**Socialisation is not:** Plonking your very young puppy in the middle of a group of dogs or people and letting him "get on with it"; or leaving it at a day care facility with untrained or unknowledgeable staff who cannot guarantee that they will watch out for the welfare of your puppy and rescue it when it is overwhelmed - that is called flooding. (More on Day Care and Dog Parks in a separate handout.)

*Socialisation is **not**:* Allowing your puppy to greet each and every single dog while out on a walk (that's setting yourself up for problems later)

*Socialisation is **not**:* Allowing your children and their friends to play with your puppy for long periods of time without ensuring that they are handling the puppy correctly and are not prodding and pulling parts of the puppy that they shouldn't be!

## Socialising while your puppy is still undergoing the vaccination protocol

Talk to your vet about the presence of Parvovirus in the various areas in your community. If there is danger, then carry your puppy and/or take a clean plastic tarp to place it on. Parvovirus spores can hang around in the environment for up to 2 years, so coming up with ways to expose your puppy to good experiences without risking it picking up a nasty disease can be challenging to say the least, but it must be done.

- Take opportunities as they arise: if you are in a safe area, ask workmen if they wouldn't mind if you approached them with your puppy and giving your puppy a pat (if your puppy looks like he wouldn't mind). If your puppy does mind, stand at a distance he is comfortable and just watch for a while. Talk to your puppy, and give a treat if you feel so inclined.
- If you don't have kids in your life, take some time to stand apart from but outside a school just at the end of the day – not so close that too many children come near or that you're in the way, but near enough that the puppy can watch the children and periodically a treat will come his way. Or do some obedience exercises like rapid sits and downs, some tethered waits and so on with the pup while it is the children's play time. Again rewarding with a treat, a pat, praise or a game with his own toy from time to time. Also do this near playgrounds and skateboard parks, etc.
- Take your puppy to the beach: below the high tide line is usually fairly safe and your puppy can go for a walk, and perhaps even greet known dogs (known to you that they are vaccinated and friendly).
- Take your puppy for a short ride in the car to a busy sports field or shopping centre, and just sit in the car with your puppy watching the world go past. (Or you could do that anywhere you have that is local and would get a wide variety of types of people).
- With new puppies I will often make very frequent vet visits, just to weigh them, and get the reception staff and any passing vets and nurses to say hello and give my puppy a pat, then I leave. No procedures - just a pleasant visit to some cool people. Apply this protocol to lots of things and places.
- Use your imagination, but the important thing is to establish and maintain a connection of trust between you and your dog, and the dog and his environment next. If your dog trusts that you will always keep him safe, no matter what, then your dog will trust that there is no need for him to be concerned about anything.
- **Don't stop with the practice just because your puppy is older than 14 weeks!**

Oh – and that comment about allowing your young pup or dog to greet every passerby? Nando Brown (of Incredimal and Rescue Dog to Super Dog) has a 1in3 rule. For every 3 dogs you meet while out: 1 you will ignore completely, 1 you will greet quickly, 1 you will allow some play with (as long as it's okay with the other dog and owner, of course). I prefer a 1in5 rule myself, but I guess it depends on how many people you typically meet while out walking your dog. If it is busy I up the ante, so out of every 5 potential greetings ignore 2, say Hi to 2, engage in conversation in 1. In each set of 5 mix it up, but try and keep track and ensure that your dog doesn't get to go play with every dog or child or person he sees. We don't greet every single person we pass by on the street, nor do we expect to. We also don't engage in long conversations even when we pass someone we know. Occasionally we will stop and have a chat. Apply the same balanced principles to your dog's daily outings and "socialisation" regimen and provided the genetics are right, you will have a happy, well-adjusted dog.