



Why You Need to Socialize Your Puppy

The importance of socialization can't be stressed enough.

These days, more and more people understand that puppies need to be socialized. But sometimes people wonder, how do we know this? It's based on classic research in canine science.

What does science tell us about the need to socialize puppies?

Many papers contribute to our understanding of puppies. In 1950, J.P. Scott and Mary-Vesta Marston published a study of 17 litters, including the earliest age at which they opened their eyes for the first time, began to walk, and engaged in play. They hypothesized there were critical periods in canine development.

In 1959, C.J. Pfaffenberger and J.P. Scott noticed that puppies being raised to be guide dogs were more likely to fail their training if they were kept in kennels for longer and missed some early socialization.

Then in 1961, Daniel Freedman, John King and Orville Elliott published research on puppies in Science. They said, "the net result suggests that the seventh week of age was the period in which the pups were most receptive to socialization, and that 2½ to 9-13 weeks of age approximates a critical period for socialization to human beings."

They studied eight litters of puppies (five of Cocker Spaniels, three of Beagles). It was an isolation experiment in which each mother and her pups were kept in a fenced one-acre field without any contact with people. Food and water was supplied via openings in the fence.

Every week, certain pups were taken from each litter for 7 days of socialization. The socialization does not match what people do for puppies nowadays; in fact, during their week indoors, the pup was played with, fed and otherwise taken care of, during just three thirty minute sessions per day.

Pups were taken from their litters for socialization at 2, 3, 5, 7 or 9 weeks of age. At the end of the week, they were returned to their mum and litter-mates.

Every day during the socialization there was a 10 minute test of how much time the puppy would spend near the experimenter. The 2-week old pups were too young to really do anything. But by 3 weeks, they were able to interact with the experimenter and "spent most of the 10 minute period pawing, mouthing and biting him and his garments." At 5, 7 and 9 weeks old it is reported that the pups were initially wary but then warmed up (within one play session, two days and three days respectively).

At 14 weeks old, all of the puppies were removed from the field and tested over the following 2 weeks.



Five puppies acted as 'controls' and remained in the field with their mother the entire time. The result of not being socialized was terrible.

The scientists said, "unless socialization occurred before 14 weeks of age, withdrawal reactions from humans became so intense that normal relationships could not thereafter be established."

One of the control puppies was "petted and fondled" every day for the following three months, and did not really become more sociable in that time.

It's interesting to look back at this article because science – and dog training – has improved since it was conducted. Full details of the socialization are not given and the numbers of puppies are small. These days proper desensitization and counter-conditioning would be used for a fearful pup (subjecting it to unwanted petting could make it even more fearful).

Nonetheless, these results tell us a lot. They tie in with other studies of the time, including raising Chihuahua puppies with cats (Fox, 1969). They relate to what is known about sensitive periods in other animals (including humans). But now that we know how harmful lack of socialization is, the study would not be repeated today.

Research into the socialization of puppies is ongoing. Recently, scientists discovered that in some breeds, the sensitive period for socialization may end sooner (Morrow et al 2015). This means that socialization must begin at the breeder, before you even bring your puppy home.

What does socialization of puppies mean?

Socializing puppies is about more than just people. It involves pleasant experiences with unknown dogs, surfaces, places; anything that puppy might come across as an adult. Socialization should start in the home of the breeder, or the foster home if it is a rescue (puppies are available from rescues too). If you're getting a puppy, ask the breeder or rescue what they do to socialize puppies, and be prepared to do lots of socialization yourself.

In her book *Culture Clash* Jean Donaldson says, "It's advisable to go way overboard covering all the bases before the socialization window closes, especially for spookier breeds or individuals. This means exposing the puppy to as wide a social sphere as possible in terms of human age groups, sexes, sizes, shapes, colours and gaits. The experiences should be positive (play, treats, nothing scary) and include a wide variety of patting, handling and movement by the humans. "It also means getting the puppy used to anything it may have to encounter in later life, such as car rides, veterinary exams (make the first one or two fun rather than scary), cats, traffic, soccer games, elevators and pointy sticks."

There is a balance to be struck in socializing puppies to prevent future behaviour problems and protecting them from disease when they are not fully immunized. This is something to discuss with your vet. The AVSAB position statement on puppy socialization says,



“Because the first three months are the period when sociability outweighs fear, this is the primary window of opportunity for puppies to adapt to new people, animals and experiences. Incomplete or improper socialization during this important time can increase the risk of behavioural problems later in life including fear, avoidance, and/or aggression. Behavioural problems are the greatest threat to the owner-dog bond... Behavioural issues, not infectious diseases, are the number one cause of death for dogs under three years of age.”

“The importance of a critical period for socialization is hard to overestimate,” says Jean Donaldson. It’s important to get it right. And because dog training is an unlicensed profession, this means you should choose your puppy’s dog trainer with care.

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<http://www.companionanimalpsychology.com/2015/02/why-you-need-to-socialize-your-puppy.html>

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