



Be Your Dog's Best Bud

Kelly Goman Dunbar

There is a buzzword among the dog-training community that either deeply resonates or irritates, as buzzwords often do. The word is socialization. In the dog world, there is much debate as to whether socializing a puppy is a good or a bad thing.



Before debating the pros and cons of socialization, it's important to define what it is and what it is not. The dictionary definition of socialization that most pertains to dog training is: "the adoption of the behavior patterns of the surrounding culture." So with respect to that explanation, to socialize a puppy is to teach her to become familiar with the environment and culture in which she inhabits. Since dogs are domestic creatures and live within our human-centric culture, this means that the goal of socializing a puppy is to teach pups to live with people, to follow our rules, and to be comfortable in our homes and in our parks and in our communities.

I really don't see how anyone can argue with the idea that socializing a dog is a bad idea, based on that definition. After all, there is another term for the same principle ... training. To socialize a dog to live with humans is to train a dog, period. It is to familiarize dogs with our rules and expectations. It is to introduce dogs to our environment and then teach them how we'd like them to behave while among us upright creatures and our demanding and very foreign (to dogs) ways.



There is, however, another definition, and I believe that it is this one that is at the crux of the controversy. You see, socialization can also be described as, “the act of meeting for social purposes.”

Unfortunately, I believe that of the two meanings listed above, the majority of folks have latched on to the latter definition as their primary objective and responsibility when raising and training a puppy. To make matters worse, somehow they get the idea that socializing to other dogs is much more important than socializing to people. Now this is where things get messy.

One could argue that it is very important to have pups meet humans for social purposes regularly throughout their lives. Dogs do have to live with us, after all, and must come into contact with all sorts of people on a regular basis. Many dogs are uncomfortable with novel people/places/things, and even a naturally confident dog doesn't necessarily generalize well, so it is a good idea to make sure your young pup understands that the world is full of a myriad of human forms so that he can be comfortable and relaxed in the presence of humans. A dog that is comfortable will not be stressed, fearful, or defensive, and is, therefore, less likely to ever be aggressive toward a human being. But really, at this point, we are pretty much back to describing our first definition of socialization, which I believe we all agree is a legitimate and sensible strategy.

However, for some reason, most people think that socializing a puppy means to introduce their pup to oodles and oodles of not just Poodles and Doodles, but all sorts of other dogs, too. Not only do people think their dog needs to meet every dog that comes along, they also seem to believe that all dogs should play and otherwise actively interact. This leads to all sorts of trouble in the form of training challenges and even sometimes full-blown behavior problems.

It's a preposterous idea that our dogs should meet, let alone get along with, every dog that he or she encounters on a walk or passes by at the park. Dogs are individuals with personalities, likes, and dislikes. They are not all perpetual social loons, but rather sentient creatures with a desire for a sense of agency. Additionally, regardless of whether your dog likes other dogs or not, taking time to appropriately socially approach nearly every dog your gal or guy see takes energy and serves as an enormous distraction. Your dog cannot both properly attend to the environment and doggie rules of engagement and also be fully engaged with you. So, nonstop dog-dog interactions are a disservice to your training time and your personal relationship with your dog.

You should be your dog's best friend. Don't rely on the environment or others to entertain your pup when you're out and about. Rather than let your dog simply run free and run up to lots of (potentially unwilling) canine strangers, play interactive games with your pup. Bring a fetch toy, a tug, and a few tasty treats, and take your show on the road. Play hide and seek and chase; explore the park together! The bonus of this is you'll earn your dog's rapt attention and admiration if you do these things instead of checking out while you check in to Facebook. Giving your dog your full attention help him do the same and will lead to a well-trained dog that can handle anything in the world at large, because he knows you've got his back.



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So, please, by all means socialize your dog. Introduce your dog to all sorts of environments and train in lots of different places. Make sure your dog meets your close friends and family and that he or she has a few special canine friends to can chill out with and enjoy. And then leave it at that. Build your bond, and be your dog's best bud.

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