

THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIALIZATION

One night my husband was out of town and I had to do his usual job of taking our dogs for their evening walk. Part of our routine took us down a busy street. As we approached a corner, a stranger (to me) called to my dogs by name. At her request, my dogs performed their usual sideshow, concluding with a high-five, the urban version of "give me your paw."

This incident illustrates a very important aspect of raising a dog: socialization, which means constantly exposing the puppy and adolescent to new sights, sounds, situations, environments, textures and all types of people in as many situations and settings as possible. Socialization may be the most important part of raising dogs. Some dogs have very strong protective-discriminatory instincts and must be very deliberately socialized.

To do this well you need a huge amount of time and persistence and if you live in a rural area, creativity. But proper socialization will pay off later in your dog's life. Properly socializing your dog involves more than attending puppy kindergarten class. For the first year of its life, plan daily socialization sessions if you can. Our male routinely runs errands with us. He goes to the office, the bank, the dry cleaners, the post office, all fresco restaurants and the campus where my husband teaches. He's welcome in these establishments because he's at ease with and enjoys these situations.

You should also try to expose your dog to unique situations, if appropriate. When the Olympic torch came through our city, I missed it, but my dog was there, although my husband didn't see much of the action because people stopped him to ask about our dog. Walking around town with a dog is a great way to meet people.

Socialization doesn't stop when you're at home. If the Avon Lady calls, have her in for a little socialization with the dog. Our dog routinely gets a treat from the mail carrier. He was even invited by the pizza deliverer to "ride shotgun" one night. You can also ask neighborhood children over for some puppy play. But be warned: When I did, one of the kids returned the next day to offer his \$10 "life savings" for the dog. I had to decline.

It's also important to encourage strangers to hold, pet and gently touch your dog. Whether you have a pet or show dog, teach it to accept being handled, touched, manipulated and even restrained by strangers in normal as well as adverse situations.

An adolescent dog may experience a period of shyness. If it does, encourage--but don't force--it to approach the person or object it is avoiding. Don't give in to the dog, but be upbeat and playful as you make it confront its fears.

You can't oversocialize a dog. The more it meets and interacts with strangers, the more self-confident and comfortable with them it will become, yet because of its genetic makeup, its protective instincts will remain strong. The result of your persistent socialization of our intelligent and very trainable breed will be an even more wonderful companion, and you'll meet many new human friends in the process.

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