

Puppy Socialization: Starting off on the right paw

Congratulations on your new baby! Your baby may not be human, but the next 4 to 6 weeks are going to be a very busy time as you puppy-proof your home and take advantage of this crucial developmental period through constant socialization activities.

Puppies experience a developmental stage in the first 2 to 4 months of life during which they are more curious and accepting of new people, places, and new experiences than they are fearful of them. It is during this window that providing extensive positive exposure to people, dogs, places, sounds, and other novel things is critical to the behavioral wellbeing of any dog. **The goal of socialization is to help your puppy feel comfortable and confident moving through the great big world** – the goal of socialization is NOT to have your dog play with or greet every dog or person all the time. **Lack of proper socialization during the first 4 months of life can contribute to fearful or aggressive behaviors later in life.**

Let's talk about PARVOVIRUS.

It's the reason we urge such careful precautions for puppies under 5 months of age.

Parvo is a gastrointestinal disease that is easy to vaccinate for but has a ~50% mortality rate if contracted. It is a hearty virus that can survive on surfaces for over a year and is passed on through residue of infected bodily fluids.

Parvo is very easy to transmit—people can pick it up on their shoes and bring it into a home, outdoor cats can pick it up on their feet and bring it into closed yards, etc. Puppies can ingest it by licking it off their paws or nose after coming into contact with contamination.

Until your puppy is 5 months old and has had at least 3 Da2PP vaccines, they are considered at high risk for contracting the virus. Dogs who are 6 months and older are less at risk but should still be vaccinated.

The reason we booster the Da2PP vaccine every 3 weeks is because occasionally the mother's maternal antibodies will stop the vaccine from becoming fully effective. Since we often don't know when the puppy stopped nursing, we have to continue to booster until we are sure it has taken effect.

Many veterinary professionals urge pet parents to keep their puppies inside only/not let their feet touch the ground outside until they are at least 16-18 weeks old and have at least 3 vaccine boosters. However, there are also risks in limiting your puppy's exposure to environmental stimuli during their critical developmental period.

Over the past few years, many behavior professionals have begun to recommend a higher levels of risk tolerance when allowing your puppy to explore environments. We urge you to talk to your vet, get creative, and assess your own level of risk tolerance.

It is very important to consider the health and safety of your young puppy prior to receiving all their vaccinations. However, with some effort, we can provide puppies with safe social experiences to prepare them for adulthood even before their puppy vaccination series is complete.

The next 4 to 6 weeks are going to be intense with all that good socialization, but helping your dog feel safe in the world and develop socially appropriate behaviors as an adult is worth every bit of effort. For more information, check out:

https://avsab.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Puppy_Socialization_Position_Statement_Download_-_10-3-14.pdf

Here are some **DO's** and **DON'Ts** to help guide your efforts.

- **DO attend a puppy class.** These classes are designed to provide gentle and positive exposure to people, puppies, sounds, textures, and other novel stimuli. A quality puppy class will *also* teach owners how to read their puppy's body language to ensure the puppy has good experiences that will color the puppy's later impressions of the world. You can sign up to take the East Bay SPCA's Puppy Stars class at www.eastbayspca.org

For more information, or to request behavior help, visit our website at www.eastbayspca.org/behaviorhelp



- **DO take your puppy out EVERY chance you get.** Take your puppy for rides in the car. Carry your puppy into dog-friendly stores, or use a disinfectant wipe to disinfect a shopping cart before setting your puppy down on a blanket in the cart. Carry your puppy to “fun-only” visits at your veterinarian or groomer, making sure to only set your puppy down on recently disinfected surfaces.
- **DO use treats and toys liberally!** Let the cookies flow whenever your puppy joins you on an adventure! Give your puppy a favorite chewy for car rides. Play tug while your puppy rides in your shopping cart. Let the veterinary or grooming staff give your puppy lots of yummy goodies. This will help your puppy associate these places with fun things. For more ideas on enrichment toys, see our [Canine Enrichment Handout!](#)
- **DO let your puppy explore a variety of safe environments.** While it’s important to avoid letting your puppy walk in areas with large concentrations of parvovirus, such as dog parks or some cities with large populations of unvaccinated animals, you can still get creative in allowing your puppy to interact with new environments safely. This can mean sitting in your hatchback trunk together at a lookout point and peoplewatching, using a stroller to move them around urban environments, putting down a sheet or tarp that they are confined to on a “picnic” at a low traffic park, or opening your front door and watching people and other dogs go by. **Make sure that your puppy is secure** either by using a leash or a barrier such as an exercise pen or baby gate in these scenarios.
- **DO watch people and dogs from a distance.** Give your puppy lots of tasty treats for watching the people and dogs go by so that your puppy learns to expect good things from you whenever they see people or dogs.
- **DO create novel things for your puppy to explore in your own home.** Fill a kiddie pool with plastic bottles for your puppy to stomp through and chomp. Toss treats into a variety of sizes of cardboard boxes for your puppy to search, climb over, and enjoy. Bring them tunnels and other obstacles to crawl through, climb, and explore. Add water to the pool on warm days. Fill it with sand or dirt for digging on cold days. Get creative. The options for helping your puppy experience new surfaces, textures, and objects are endless!
- **DON’T force your puppy to meet or interact with people, dogs, or places that make your puppy uncomfortable.** The impressions made during this critical period will impact behavior a year or two from now, so it’s essential your puppy explores novel objects, places, people, and dogs at their own pace and that this exploration is paired with **positive experiences**, such as fun play, tasty treats, and plenty of choice in their interactions.
- **DON’T forget to take breaks!** Many puppies aren’t ready for hours-long excursions until they’ve had practice, and just like children, can become frustrated and overwhelmed. Keep sessions short and positive at first!
- **DON’T allow your puppy to walk on the ground in high traffic areas.** Places like urban streets, public parks, or other areas that have lots of passing dogs and high risk of disease transmission are places where your puppy shouldn’t touch the ground until they are fully vaccinated.
- **DON’T take your puppy to the dog park, or around unknown dogs.** There is no way to monitor the vaccination status of dogs at the dog park, and not every dog there will have the social skills necessary to interact in a safe and appropriate way with your puppy.
- **DON’T allow strange dogs to approach and meet your puppy when you are out for walks.** If your puppy feels overwhelmed or threatened by these experiences, they may develop leash reactivity and aggression toward other dogs as they get older. **Note:** “more” interaction is not necessarily “better” - your puppy should also be learning that they do not have to interact with every dog all the time! The quality of these experiences matter as much as the quantity.
- **DON’T allow well-meaning people to invasively interact with your puppy.** Strangers picking up the puppy, kissing them, or even unexpectedly petting them can be frightening to a young puppy, and these negative experiences that occur early in life will determine how your puppy feels about people when your puppy becomes an adult. **Instead, advocate for your puppy!** It’s ok to tell people “my puppy isn’t ready to be handled by strangers yet, but you can toss them a treat if you like!”

The app “Pupstanding” is an easy way to help you guide your puppy’s socialization! Available in iOS and Android

For more information, or to request behavior help, visit our website at www.eastbayspca.org/behaviorhelp