



Puppy Socialization: Starting off on the Right Paw

Congratulations on your new baby! Your baby may not be human, but the next few months 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.*

One of the key points to realize here is that the science tells us that we can't simply EXPOSE our puppies to new things. In order for socialization to be effective, *we need do 2 things:*

1. **Make sure we are exposing our puppy to the stimulus at a LOW ENOUGH LEVEL that it will not overwhelm or frighten them.** If we plop our puppy down into an overwhelming experience from which they can't escape, this risks something called "flooding," which can have the opposite effect, even if the puppy looks "fine" in the moment.
2. **PAIR the controlled exposure with something POSITIVE, something the puppy greatly likes or desires.** This is most often food, but (depending on your puppy) can also be toys, or interactions with a favorite human. Extensive research tells us that *it is only when we PAIR the experiences with something positive* that we get the effects we want; that is, a puppy who expects good things (and is subsequently calm, relaxed, and social) around those stimuli.

Let's Talk About ParvoVirus

It's the reason we urge such careful precautions for puppies under five 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 for puppies 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 in high risk areas (such as dog parks, around vet clinics, or other high-dog traffic areas) 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, [click here](#).

Here are some **DO's** and **DON'T's** to help guide your efforts.

- **DO attend a puppy class.** These classes are designed to provide controlled 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 for East Bay SPCA's Puppy Stars class through our website!
- **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 and 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 peopewatching, 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. Most people don't think "look calmly at the other dogs" is a skill, but that's often what we want our dogs to do 90% of the time. Make sure to help them practice it now!

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- **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 a kiddie 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!
- **DO invest in a Biothane longline!** This is the number one tool our trainers recommend to all their clients. A longline is a longer than average leash. Though they come in many lengths, the 10-12ft lengths are wonderful for helping your puppy explore without dragging you around. For more information, check out [this article](#).
- **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. Set up situations so that your puppy has the opportunity to opt out if they need to!
- **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. You can get creative here! Strollers, carts, carry pouches, backpacks, the back of your car, and strategic sheets/picnic blankets can provide flexibility.
- **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. Instead, source 1:1 meets with known dogs, and help your puppy navigate those interactions, whether that means helping them take preemptive breaks by calling them away for treats, or giving them a way to leave quickly to a safe space if they get scared!
- **DON'T allow strange dogs to approach and meet your puppy when you are out for walks.** If your puppy consistently feels overwhelmed or threatened by these experiences, it can lead to 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

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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!" or, "I'm working to help my pup be calmer during greetings, would you offer your hand when he sits instead?"

The app **Pupstanding** (available for iOS and Android) is an easy way to help you guide your puppy's socialization!