

PUPPY SOCIALIZATION IN TIMES OF SOCIAL DISTANCE



Puppy socialization is essentially about teaching puppies the ropes of life in the human world, providing positive experiences of novelty, and building trust and confidence, so they can grow into well-adjusted adult dogs.

That means introducing them to all kinds of people, dogs, other animals, places, surfaces, sights and sounds, both inside and outside their own home. The window of opportunity for this is time limited, optimally during the developmental phase that occurs between 2 and 4 months of age. Without it, puppies are more likely to grow up to be suspicious, cautious, fearful, and/or aggressive.

Right now, humans are being urged or required to limit their exposure to the world in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. So, what's a new puppy parent to do, when a young puppy needs the exact opposite?

This article offers some suggestions for socializing puppies under COVID19 conditions. They are also useful for socializing puppies before they are fully vaccinated, even when the pandemic is over.

Do what you can with what you have

The greater the number of new experiences puppies have, the more confident and adaptable they are likely to become, *providing these experiences are positive*. You can achieve this by making sure each new experience isn't too intense (close, loud, scary, startling,

overwhelming), and giving your puppy time to build up curiosity and courage. Increase exposure gradually, and pair the experience with fun activities and/or food treats.

Start at home, be creative!

Your home is your puppy's whole world at first – make sure it is one that offers plenty of new experiences!

Objects

Look around your house from a puppy's eye view – see how many objects of different shapes you can find, and let your puppy explore them with paws, nose and mouth (if appropriate).

Sounds

Consider all the things in your house that might sound scary or weird for your puppy – vacuum cleaner, coffee maker, printer, hair dryer, electric toothbrush, electronic sounds of all kinds. Expose your puppy at low volume and/or at a distance at first if he is scared.

Smells

Your puppy knows the world primarily through her nose – remember to let her explore your house and yard with it! And if you bring things home from the outside world (like shopping bags or delivery boxes), let her have a little sniff of them too. There is more in a puppy sniff than we humans can ever imagine!

Tastes and textures

Make sure your puppy has a variety of toys of different textures, shapes and sizes – supervise to be sure they are safe for your puppy. Any toy that is likely to be chewed up can be reserved for use as a reward in a training setting, where you keep it under your control. On the other hand, don't provide too much variety in training treats for young puppies – it can upset their stomachs. Tiny pieces of their normal food is often sufficient.

Actions

Make sure your puppy sees you brushing your teeth, drying your hair, washing the dishes, doing exercises, sweeping, talking on the phone, working on your computer, unpacking shopping bags, and anything else you normally do.

As well, you might act out different scenarios that aren't typical of your home, act out different types of gait, speak in different voice tones and volumes, make exaggerated movements (waving your arms, limping, staggering, walking heavily, tiptoeing).

Surfaces

Gather some things with different textures – blanket, sheet of tin foil, plastic sheet, cotton sheet, cardboard, paper, and anything else you can think of – and let your puppy explore them, walk on and off them, play on them.

Set up an obstacle courses at home with household objects. Here's a great example from CDCD's puppy expert, Heather Ohmart. <https://youtu.be/UbiKzzTkFil>
Notice how Heather stays really focused on the puppy, encouraging and praising him.

Obstacle courses like this help puppies develop coordination, hind end awareness, and confidence.

Barriers and other restraints

Get your puppy used to being restrained by a crate, behind a baby gate, on-leash or on a tether, very slowly if needed, with lots of supervision. Some puppies don't tolerate frustration or separation well and need age-appropriate, carefully taught experience of them when they are young.

Potty time

When you take your puppy out to urinate or defecate, do so on on-leash at least some of the time, even if you have a fenced potty area. Encourage your puppy to potty in different weather conditions and on different surfaces, like gravel, grass, dry ground, wet ground (with the exception of places frequented by other dogs if your puppy is not fully vaccinated yet.)

Home alone

Puppies need to experience time by themselves, so they do not become over-dependent on people and develop separation issues. Being alone doesn't come naturally to them – they need to learn about it. If someone is home all or most of the time, be sure to leave the puppy alone for short periods of time (crated or in a puppy-proofed space). Don't let your puppy follow you everywhere, even to the bathroom. If your puppy finds this difficult, start by leaving the room and coming back right away. Then work up to a few minutes and longer. Do the same for leaving your puppy in your car.

The world outside

Puppies need exposure to the outside world! Depending on your puppy's vaccination status and what COVID19 restrictions are in place in your area, you may be able to go on walks and be outside with your puppy, or you may need to simulate outdoor experiences as best you can. For very young puppies who aren't fully vaccinated it is important to note that they should not be allowed to walk, sniff or eat where unvaccinated dogs may have been, such as sidewalks, dog parks, public parks.

People

In COVID19 times, your puppy might think your family is the only one on earth!

Let all symptom-free members of your household handle, feed and play with your puppy (supervise children, and limit contact with very young ones)

If you have safe contact with any other people, make sure your puppy gets to be part of it, even for a short time and from a distance.

(Note: so far there is no evidence that dogs can get COVID19, but they should be treated as potential vectors for it. Anyone who is sick should not touch, pet or play with the puppy. Wash your hands thoroughly after contact with your puppy.)

Other dogs and animals

This is also a hard one with COVID19 social distancing measures in place. Your puppy may think she is the only dog on earth too! Positive contact with any other dogs, or household pets, if you have them, is a major advantage. If you don't have other pets, read on for more ideas!

Remember that *distance exposure is still exposure!* For example, you might:

- Go on car trips so your puppy can see the world through the window, hear and smell the world with window down or the door open. Park in many different places and spend 5 minutes in each place with your puppy on your lap, looking at whatever is interesting.
 - Take your puppy for a walk in a baby sling, pack or stroller.
 - Park near a dog park and let puppy see and hear any dogs at play from the safety of your arms or the car.*
 - Put a blanket on the ground, with your puppy on leash or in ex-pen, to watch the world go by, including watch kids playing, riding bicycles, scooters and skate boards.*
- *Do not allow people or other dogs to pet or approach the puppy.

Close encounters with other adult dogs and puppies, once safely vaccinated, are immensely valuable for young dogs. Setting these up safely may take considerable creativity, and may or not be possible depending on the state of the pandemic and COVID19 prevention measures in your area. You may wish to consult with a training professional who can help you figure out if there are ways you can do this without endangering human lives.

Simulate the real thing

This is especially important when strict social restrictions are in place. There is a lot you can do!

Sights and Sounds

Play sounds on your computer or phone (you can find plenty of them on You Tube) such as:

- Children playing
- Infant crying
- Voice tones
- Dogs barking
- City traffic
- Construction noise
- Sirens
- Fireworks
- Thunder

You can also see if your puppy pays attention to the visuals on your TV or computer screen. Lots of puppies like to watch TV! You can start out on a smaller screen with no sound and increase the size and volume gradually.

- Faces with different skin tones, hair styles, and other characteristics like facial hair
- Body shapes
- Dogs and puppies

- Other animals
- Vehicles

(If your puppy reacts with aggressive barking or lunging, at the sight or sound of other dogs or people, contact a professional trainer. Now is a good time to work on this!)

Let's play dress up

Gather unusual articles of clothing and put them on, even if you don't normally wear them, for example: hoodie, overcoat, loose flapping clothing, various types of hats, sunglasses, backpack, walking cane, kids' dress-ups, mock facial hair, Halloween costumes.

You can try putting some of these on your puppy too - useful if your pup ever has to wear protective equipment!

Also, it's a good idea to get your puppy used to wearing a head halter (and/or muzzle) in case you need them in the future (even if you don't think you will).

Let's play veterinarian

Pretend you are a veterinarian and give your pup a mock physical every so often: Check ears, eyes, teeth, nose, tail, anus, private parts, paws, belly, coat for fleas. Make it fun! If you have a white coat, anything that you could pretend is a stethoscope, and something like a bench or low shelf to stand the puppy on, use them too!

Grooming time

Make sure you can wash and towel or blow dry your puppy, brush and comb her, use a flea comb, hold all of her paws, clip toenails, clean ears, wipe eyes. Get your puppy used to being on a raised surface for grooming. All this may take several steps, lots of treats, and patience, but persevere! It is worth it for your own sake, and any groomer will love you for it too!

Home schooling

Last but not least, it's important to mention that training a puppy ideally starts at own home, when they are very young. Don't wait till you are outside to teach your puppy to walk nicely on leash, or come when you call. Practice these at home, where it is easiest for your puppy to focus and relax. Get the whole family involved. Make it fun!

Contact us! We can help! Even from a distance!

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