

# Puppy Socialization GUIDE

*A step-by-step guide  
to socializing your new puppy.*

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# INTRODUCTION

Getting a new puppy is exciting! However, it can also be incredibly overwhelming. For weeks you dream of the perfect puppy, and then from the moment you bring them home, you suddenly realize just how much work goes into raising a puppy.

In this guide we'll focus on socialization, learning all about the different aspects of socialization, why it's important, and even get a fun little scavenger hunt-style challenge.

*I hope this guide answers all of your socialization questions. But, as is life, every puppy will come with their own challenges. Please don't hesitate to reach out to me at Cape Canine Academy if you need a little more guidance.*

*MJ*



## Nature vs. Nurture?

**Before we get started, I want to remind you of the importance of genetics. Genetics aren't everything, but they play a big part in our dog's behavior. It's very important to nurture our dogs with the best upbringing we can give them, but keeping their breed characteristics in mind will help you set them up for success.**

Many factors determine what your puppy's personality will be like as an adult. The truth is that nature and nurture both play large roles in creating your dog's unique personality. Even if you do everything you can to properly socialize your puppy, they still may not enjoy interacting with strangers or strange dogs as an adult. Genetics have a large hand to play here, so researching your dog's breed can help you predict what they'll be like as an adult. However, even among dogs of the same breed, they are all unique individuals with their likes and dislikes. The goal of socialization is not to manipulate your dog's personality but to ensure that they don't become fearful or overly excited by the world around them.

***For example, I'm not afraid of Brussels sprouts... but I still don't like them.***

In addition to their breed, some other factors also play a key role. Genetics go deeper than just a breed. If your puppy's parents were prone to being fearful or aggressive, these traits can get passed down. If the mother was stressed during her pregnancy, those stress hormones are given to the puppies in utero and have lifetime effects.

To make a long story short, do the best you can by your puppy but don't beat yourself up if you need extra help from a professional trainer.

# At what age should you begin to socialize your puppy?

*The short answer is that you should begin socializing your puppy as soon as you bring them home... here's why:*

Developmentally speaking, puppies go through something called a “socialization period” between 3-12 weeks of age. This period of development is the prime time for socialization to happen because it's when puppies are the most impressionable and learn how to interact with the world around them. While socialization is a lifelong effort, if you can give them positive experiences at this age you'll have nature working alongside you to keep your puppy successful.

## **Perspectives: Behavior vs. Veterinary**

Here in the U.S., it's standard for puppies to get their final round of vaccines, including the rabies vaccine, at 16 weeks old. Because of this, it's common to hear advice that tells you not to take your puppy anywhere until they get their final vaccines - but this is after the prime socialization period has already closed.

There is truth to both. Your best opportunities to socialize your puppy to the world happen before 16 weeks, but they're also at risk for contracting dog-borne illnesses such as parvovirus. As with anything, there's a healthy balance and it's always good to weigh your risk vs. reward for your lifestyle and environment.

As a rule of thumb, I don't recommend taking puppies to dog parks, doggy day cares, or letting them walk on the floor of the pet store. However, there are great benefits to using the prime socialization period to your advantage. Talk to your veterinarian or dog trainer if you're unsure how to do this safely.





# So, what is socialization?

We've all heard how important it is to socialize our puppies early on. But what is socialization? And how do we make sure we do it right?

The truth is, quite a few misconceptions are floating around nowadays regarding what proper socialization is, how to do it, and when to start.

One of the big misconceptions these days is that to socialize our puppies, we need to have them meet and play with as many other dogs as possible.

**This couldn't be further from the truth.**

Forcing our puppies into interacting with strangers and their dogs is likely to take you down one of two paths...

The first is that our puppies become over-excited about meeting new people and dogs. *Well, this sounds ok, right?* Most people don't mind this until their adult dog begins pulling them down the sidewalk towards every person they encounter, not able to pay any attention to them because everyone else is more interesting. This can also create a dog who doesn't understand that not every dog wants to be greeted. While it may be cute to us, dogs who run up to and invade the personal space of dogs they don't know are considered rude by other dogs. And while many dogs are trained to accept this, many won't. To keep our dogs safe, we need to teach them to respect the space of strangers.

The second path is one where our puppy, unfortunately, has a bad experience and becomes fearful of other dogs or people. This can potentially lead to reactivity and aggression.

Here's the rule of thumb for who can interact with your puppy: Your friends and family, their dogs... and no one else. There's no need for everyone you pass on a walk or in a store to say hello and invade your puppy's space.

*Okay, if I've lost you, just bear with me...*



# The Grocery Store Analogy

Let's say I go to the grocery store to get some shopping done.

If I run into one of my closest friends, we'll end up chatting away in an aisle for quite some time. There'd be no doubt to the people passing by that we know each other well and are very comfortable with each other.

If I run into my neighbor, I may give a friendly hello and ask him how his son is doing. After a short moment, we'll part ways and continue our shopping.

Most people that I pass though, I'll likely ignore. I may give a polite smile and "excuse me" here and there as it's appropriate, but I don't bother them. I'm not afraid of them, I'm used to their presence, and I'm not being rude by giving them space. Quite the opposite. Have you ever stood in line and had the person behind you stand so close it feels like their breathing down your neck? How'd you feel about that?

Now, let's say I'm still doing my shopping and someone I don't know runs up, hugs me, and hangs their arm over me as they talk too close to my face and inspect everything in my cart. They then follow me around the store as I try to get away without making a scene. Finally, I snap and rudely tell them to give me space. In response, they reply, "JEEZ! I was just trying to be friendly!".

We seem to know and be comfortable with boundaries for ourselves, but often assume all dogs should enjoy being bothered by other dogs.... we even expect them to be the annoying fellow shopper.

Your dog should grow to have the same public manners that you do, able to have friends they get along with, polite to the general public, but not a bother and able to mind their business.

# Aspects Of Socialization

When thinking of socialization, I want you to think of the word “exposure”. Properly socializing your puppy means exposing them to a variety of sights, sounds, smells, textures, and situations in a manner that helps them be confident but not overly excited.

Let's look at each category:

## Meeting New Dogs & New People:

Think back to the grocery store analogy.

Introduce your puppy to your friends and family, along with their dogs if the dogs are healthy, friendly, and happy to make a new friend.

Instead of letting your puppy run mad, focus on teaching your puppy how to interact with these people and dogs. Training begins from the moment you bring them home, whether you're doing so intentionally or not.

You can also work on teaching your puppy how to be polite towards people they may see regularly, such as pet store clerks and mailmen.





### **Observing Dogs And People:**

This is where the magic happens. Your dog needs to be exposed to a wide variety of people and dogs while learning that they can be neutral and don't need to be afraid or interact with them.

While we often think of dogs and people as a simple thing, your puppy should get exposure to dogs with pointy ears, floppy ears, big and small, and people wearing hats, umbrellas, backpacks, etc.

Some of the best ways to do this are simply to bring your puppy places to let them watch the world around them. Sitting outside the grocery store, a park bench along the bike path, or taking them to a busy outdoor shopping area are great ways to do this.

If someone passing by asks to pet your puppy (*and let's be honest, of course they will, your puppy is adorable*), it's perfectly okay to say no. You can say something along the lines of "No thank you, we're practicing ignoring people".

These moments are wonderful opportunities for your puppy to learn that the general public is boring and that you're much more interesting. As people approach you, give your puppy a few treats for staying focused on you or sitting politely. You can even throw a few treats on the ground for puppy to sniff out to keep them occupied as you chat.



# Textures and Surfaces

This is an area of socialization that is often forgotten about. Helping your puppy to experience different textures under their feet, and navigating novel surfaces, can help them build their confidence both in themselves and their environment. Most puppies get used to hardwood, carpet, and tile because it's commonly what we have in our house. But, what about the bathtub? Woodchips? A sandy beach? Walking through the water like at the pond or a puddle? Crawling around on playground equipment and climbing on rocks and tree stumps? When you take your puppy out and about, look for new things you can teach them to explore with their feet.

# Sights and Sounds

This area of socialization may be the toughest because it requires you to explore new places. You want your puppy to be able to experience new sights and sounds that they may experience in the world as an adult, but do so in a way that doesn't add too much pressure too soon. This will vary from puppy to puppy, but here are some examples:

- Hanging out near a playground so they can hear children laughing and watch them running by.
- Taking them to the hardware store to experience the shopping cart and any equipment noises going on in the background.
- Walking in downtown areas so they can hear traffic and get used to things like traffic cones or sewer grates.
- Finding statues or sculptures they can look at and explore.

Even at home, there are many things you can begin to expose your puppy to in a positive manner such as the vacuum cleaner, blender, and hairdryer. You can also play noises such as fireworks or thunder on a speaker at a quiet volume to get them used to those sounds before they happen in real life.



# Building Confidence and Neutrality

We all want our puppies to grow into friendly dogs, but having a dog that's too friendly can lead to problems down the road. Teaching your puppy to be both confident but also calm around people, dogs, and in new settings will ensure that you can take them on all of life's adventures with you and make your day-to-day life a breeze.

Here are some tips to help you make sure you're doing everything you can to maximize manners and build your puppy up while focusing on socialization:

- Build value in yourself by giving your puppy a reason to choose you over their surroundings. Bring food or a toy on your outings and reward your puppy for being calm and for checking in with you.
- Go at your puppy's pace. Every puppy is different, and it's okay to go slow if they're unsure of something. You should keep your puppy at a distance from the new things that allow them to be comfortable and confident. It's okay if they get a little unsure for a moment, but if you notice your puppy is fearful, add some space to bring them back to their comfort zone.
- Don't force your puppy to walk up to anything they seem afraid of. *No one gets over their fear of clowns by being forced into a clown hug.* Sometimes the best reward for brave behavior is space and a moment to take a break.
- Advocate for their space, especially if they're nervous. If you're trying to teach your puppy that strangers and other dogs are boring and nothing to be concerned or excited by, then you want to prevent them from being fun or scary. It's okay for people to walk up and say hello to you, but ask them to give your puppy space so your puppy can focus on you.



# SOCIALIZATION SCAVENGER HUNT

Proper socialization, in terms of dog training, means exposing your dog to as many new sights, sounds, smells, textures, and experiences as possible (in a positive manner, of course) to create a dog who is confident in the world around them. The goal should be neutrality - not over-excitment.

A well-socialized dog is a dog who is cool, calm, and confident in the world around them.

On the following page, you'll find a scavenger hunt you can play with your new puppy. Make sure to have fun and go at a pace that they'll enjoy. Don't force them to interact with anything that makes them uncomfortable. Focus on rewarding them for calm behavior or for engaging with you around these things. Get them comfortable moving over new textures or objects to build their confidence.

Each item listed will be something your puppy can interact with in different ways. They may be things your puppy can touch, climb on, listen to, watch from a distance, or explore.

*For people, dogs, and other animals in particular - focus on your puppy focusing on you while being aware of the distraction in the background. With all things listed, stay safe, use your judgment, and make sure you're puppy has a good experience.*

## LET'S GET EXPLORING!



# Tips & Tricks

- Remember, your puppy must learn how to politely interact with and ignore both people and animals depending on the situation. Make sure to introduce your puppy to a variety of people that you know and trust while teaching them how to interact with those people. However, make sure to teach your puppy how to ignore people when it's appropriate as well.
- Sounds such as fireworks and thunderstorms can be difficult to come by, so you can play these sounds on a speaker in your home. Make sure to start the sounds at a quiet volume that your puppy barely notices, and work your way up to a more noticeable volume as they get comfortable with the noise. While playing the sounds, you can feed them, play with them, or just let the sounds happen like it's no big deal.
- Pay attention to your puppy's body language and be on the lookout for any signs of stress or fear. Signs that your puppy may be fearful or stressed include excessive panting, yawning, wide eyes, lip licking, or having no interest in taking treats from you. If you notice any of these signs, give your puppy a break and move them farther away from the thing they're concerned about.
- "Doing nothing" is a skill that we often don't think of teaching until it becomes a noticeable problem. One of my favorite ways to socialize puppies is to take them to new places and to "do nothing" by sitting on a bench and letting them watch the world calmly.
- When you take your puppy out in the world, make yourself fun and interesting. After all, you want them to grow into a dog that listens and pays attention to you. Bring food and toys with you to reward them for good behavior. Have fun with your puppy, and don't be afraid to play with them in new settings.

# SOCIALIZATION

## Scavenger Hunt



### Textures & Surfaces

- ☐ Bathtub
- ☐ Tile
- ☐ Brick
- ☐ Hardwood
- ☐ Carpet
- ☐ Wet grass
- ☐ Stairs
- ☐ Playground equipment
- ☐ Sand
- ☐ Wooden foot bridges
- ☐ Vinyl flooring

### Sights

- ☐ Bicycles
- ☐ Roller blades
- ☐ Passing dogs
- ☐ Kites
- ☐ Strollers
- ☐ Basketball/Soccer games
- ☐ Sprinklers
- ☐ Joggers
- ☐ Statues
- ☐ Umbrellas
- ☐ Sidewalk Signs

### Sounds

- ☐ Fireworks
- ☐ Children playing
- ☐ Traffic
- ☐ Thunder storms
- ☐ Doorbell
- ☐ Sirens
- ☐ Motorcycles
- ☐ Baby crying
- ☐ Dogs barking
- ☐ Cat meowing
- ☐ Garbage trucks
- ☐ Power tools
- ☐ Lawn mowers

### Environment

- ☐ Balloons
- ☐ Traffic cones
- ☐ Elevators
- ☐ Automatic doors
- ☐ Landscapers
- ☐ Passing Sirens
- ☐ Skate Parks
- ☐ Leaves Blowing In The Wind
- ☐ Snow
- ☐ Vacuum Cleaner
- ☐ Busy Sidewalk
- ☐ Farmer's Market
- ☐ Sporting Events

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## People

- ☐ Baseball hats
- ☐ Backpacks
- ☐ Sunglasses
- ☐ Crutches
- ☐ Wheelchairs
- ☐ Gloves
- ☐ Masks
- ☐ Uniforms
- ☐ Beards
- ☐ Wearing a hood
- ☐ Helmets
- ☐ Beards
- ☐ Tall men
- ☐ Toddlers
- ☐ Children playing

## Experiences

- ☐ Having their ears touched
- ☐ Massaging their paws (nail trims)
- ☐ Having their teeth looked at
- ☐ Going on walks
- ☐ A trip to the beach
- ☐ Going to pet-friendly stores
- ☐ Pet-friendly cafe patio
- ☐ Riding in the car
- ☐ Going through carwash
- ☐ A trip to the grooming salon
- ☐ Being brushed
- ☐ Having collars/harnesses put on/taken off
- ☐ Getting a bath

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## Contact:

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# NEED MORE HELP?

I hope this guide has helped you feel confident as you kick-start your training with your new puppy. If you have additional questions or would like someone to help you get through the rest of puppyhood, give me a call! I offer a variety of in-home training options for most of Cape Cod, MA.

Happy Training!

[LEARN MORE](#)

Thanks so much for using my puppy socialization guide! You can find more dog training tips and resources by following Cape Canine Academy on Facebook and Instagram.

*MJ*



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