



The Importance of a Well-Socialized Dog

Why should we care if our dogs are socialized? As our world becomes more dog-friendly, it is more important they are comfortable in new surroundings, situations and with new people. Years ago, PetSmart's didn't exist. We couldn't take our dogs to Bass Pro Shops or Home Depots. Dog parks weren't "invented" yet. Years ago, our dogs stayed home and perhaps took a stroll around the neighborhood. That is changing.

Why is socializing a dog important? Well, a well-socialized dog is more confident and comfortable meeting new people, isn't intimidated by places never visited, can recover when startled by loud noises or quick movements, and in general, is less likely to be fearful.

According to some experts, dogs should be socialized very early in their development. Ian Dunbar, PhD, BVetMed, MRCVS, CPDT, recommends puppies meet 100 new people by five months of age. These should be different types of people: Different sexes, ages, sizes, physical capabilities, races, wearing different apparel, carrying things... For those of us who have brought a dog into our lives after it has reached five months of age, what to do when we have passed that critical age? Is a well-socialized dog a lost cause?

At the Human Society of Harrisburg Area, we don't think so. Socializing can begin the moment you make a commitment to your dog. If you are lucky enough to have adopted a shelter dog, you can bet your dog has met or been exposed to a significant number of different people while in the shelter environment. At home, take your dog for regular walks – but change it up. Take a different route. Get in the car and walk through a new neighborhood. Go downtown and walk the city streets with the foot and car traffic, smells and sounds. It doesn't sound like much, but organizations like The Seeing Eye expect their puppy-raising families to do just that; introduce their puppies to many different people and locations in order to produce a well-socialized puppy who will then have a better chance at being trained to become a confident, social, Seeing Eye dog.

Organized obedience classes are another great social opportunity for dogs. They get to mingle with people and other dogs they didn't previously know, AND learn some manners while they're at it!

Don't limit socializing your dog to meeting new people or going new places. Acquainting your dog to noises like doorbells, the lawnmower, a tea kettle, and car horns can also help produce a social dog. Unfamiliar things like a set of stairs or smooth floor surfaces, once "conquered" are no longer intimidating to your dog thus upping its sociability factor.

Just remember, when introducing your dog to these new stimuli that "slow and steady wins the race." Don't bombard your dog with a smorgasbord of newness. Take it one

person, one noise, one situation at a time. If your dog is comfortable with the new, forge ahead. If your dog seems to be unsure, ease up and go at your dog's pace. Don't introduce anything else new until he/she seems comfortable with what was recently introduced.

Keep in mind, a socialized dog does not necessarily mean it will be a social butterfly, but rather a dog comfortable in its world. As this world becomes more accepting and inclusive of our dogs, being comfortable in that world makes their lives – and ours – richer.

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