

Socialization: What is it?

"But I don't understand", the owner of the American Eskimo puppy said. "She's well socialized to other dogs; we have two other dogs at home."

This was in response to the puppy tucking her tail and hiding in a corner at playtime during a puppy class I was teaching. Unfortunately, despite what the owner thought, her puppy was not well socialized to other dogs. Socialization is a word that is thrown around a lot by those of us working in shelters, by breeders, veterinarians, trainers and by dog owners. Unfortunately I rarely see it well defined for the average pet owner.

Socialization means that an animal is repeatedly exposed to an environment or situation until they feel comfortable with it. When animal professionals talk about socialization for dogs or cats, they are really talking about a specific socialization period during the time the animal is a puppy or kitten.

Wild animals need to learn what is safe and what is unsafe in their environment. Nature has created a period in their development where they can learn what is normal. During this sensitive period they are much more curious about their world, adapt easily to change, and aren't readily frightened by novel experiences.

However, it would be unsafe for adult animals to react this way to new things in their environment. The survival of wild animals depends on their being easily frightened by changes or appearances of the unfamiliar. And just because we have domesticated animals we keep as pets, it doesn't mean that they have lost their sensitive socialization period.

Studies have shown that dogs have a window of socialization starting at about 3 weeks of age, and extending anywhere from 14 to 20 weeks. At what age the window ends depends on such factors as the breed and the individual dog. Cats have a much smaller window. It starts at about 2 or 3 weeks of age and is just about closed around 7 weeks.

How under-socialization will impact development depends on the individual animal. Some adult animals may have no problem adapting to their world even without good socialization. Others may genetically be cautious and shy in temperament, and develop major behavioral problems if not socialized extensively. The problem is that there is no way to predict which young puppy or kitten needs extensive socialization, and which will do just fine without. But making an effort to socialize your puppy or kitten during this critical period will be only beneficial by allowing them to adapt to our world.

Socialization is much more complicated than meeting a few humans, or meeting a few other dogs. It's about learning that there is nothing to be concerned about when you meet new individuals, enter new environments, or have new experiences. Just because an owner has a few dogs living in their home, it does not help the puppy become socialized to strange dogs that it may meet. And just because a puppy grows up with children, it may not end up being well socialized to children it has never met before.

Additionally, socialization isn't just about exposing a puppy or kitten to new things. It's very important that a puppy not be forced to face a situation that frightens it, or it may create a life-long phobia. Care must be taken to help a puppy learn to be brave when faced with a situation that makes it cautious.

So instead of making a puppy accept petting from that friendly stranger that causes him to panic, a better choice would be to let the puppy set the pace. Have the person crouch down and avoid eye

contact. Allow the puppy to approach the person, rather than forcing the puppy to approach. And even better would be to have that person toss treats so that he starts to associate strangers with good things.

So many times I meet people who got their dog at an older age. "He's afraid of men, so he must have been abused by one," they tell me. It's more likely that their dog saw very few men as a young puppy.

Meeting one man during the socialization period doesn't socialize a dog or cat to men. The animal needs to meet many men during the critical period before they'll learn that men aren't something to fear. Since animals don't generalize well, they should meet men of all different heights, body types, races, ages, different types of clothing, with and without facial hair.

And because an animal is well socialized to men, it doesn't mean it will transfer to other types of humans. A well-socialized animal should be positively exposed to just as many adult women of different types, and to children of all ages.

Additionally, proper socialization includes exposure to environment. During the sensitive socialization period puppies and kittens should be exposed to different surfaces – carpeting, tile, grass, and concrete. Puppies should encounter things like car and pedestrian traffic, the sight and sound of lawn mowers or snow blowers, car rides, noises and anything else they may encounter during their lives. These exposures should be done in a positive way – praising the animal for being brave, and using treats or play as a reward for interacting with this strange new world.

Since dogs will almost always have to interact with other dogs – whether it's seeing another dog on a walk in the neighborhood, in an obedience class or a trip to the dog park, a huge effort should be taken to socialize your puppy to other dogs. Dogs have their own language, and a puppy that doesn't interact with member of his own kind will be unable to communicate with his own species. This may create a dog that later in life develops a phobia about other dogs, and reacts with aggression.

The critical socialization period ends before a puppy or kitten is fully inoculated, and so therefore every effort must be taken to ensure that you aren't exposing them to unnecessary risk. Socialization for a young puppy should not happen at a dog park where there may be disease for him to pick up.

However, an owner shouldn't discount taking their pet out in public altogether to prevent disease, and in the process end up under-socializing. The long-term damage that can occur from lack of socialization includes aggression and shyness to strangers, children and other dogs, severe fear of new places and fear of new experiences. Socialization is a gift you can give your dog or cat to allow them to be happy living in our world.

One safe way to initiate socialization with other dogs is to enroll in puppy classes. Puppy classes provide an opportunity for puppies to play with each other and learn canine body language, bite inhibition, and to accept that new dogs aren't necessarily a bad thing.

While it is important to continue to socialize an animal of any age, it's critical that a huge effort be made during the socialization window. You'll be providing your pet with the coping skills they need to live relatively stress free in our world.