

Do I Need to Take My Puppy to Puppy Class?

In a word ... **yes!**

What is Socialization?

Socialization simply means teaching your puppy to grow up to be properly social. Throughout his life, he will need to interact with other people in the world around him – you, your family, your neighbors and total strangers. He will also need to interact with other dogs and possibly cats, and he will need to understand inanimate objects – for example, riding in your car, dealing with vacuum cleaners that make noise, thunderstorms and fireworks.



In all these cases, there is a “proper” way for your puppy to act with respect to these other things in his world. But “proper” is defined by you, not by him. He is not born with an innate understanding that he shouldn’t be afraid of people he has not met, that he shouldn’t fight with other dogs, or that he shouldn’t be afraid of loud noises. It is up to you to teach him.

Puppy socialization class, or “Puppy Kindergarten”, provides a crucial step toward helping your puppy with this part of his development. Canine behavioral specialists agree that puppies are the most impressionable early in life. It is generally thought that when a puppy is between 4 and 16 weeks of age, you have the greatest opportunity to teach him the proper responses to the world around him. It is not that an older dog can’t be socialized, but it is far easier to accomplish during the “golden period” prior to 16 weeks of age.

Is there risk?

You may have been told to avoid puppy socialization class because young pups are just starting out with their vaccinations, and the risk of contracting illness is too high. This reasoning fails for at least two reasons. First, most puppies start puppy kindergarten around 8-10 weeks of age. If your puppy has followed a proper vaccination schedule, he should be adequately protected from the diseases he would most commonly encounter in class by that time. Second, as many dogs are lost later in life because of behavioral problem as are lost to infectious disease. Think of puppy kindergarten as “vaccination against behavioral problems” – it is just as important as your pup’s other vaccinations.

What happens in Puppy Socialization class?

“Do I need to be afraid of this?”

As a human, when encountering something new you have the capability to use reasoning, and deduce that you are not likely to be harmed. You know, for instance, that most people under most circumstances do not intend to harm you. Even if you have never met someone before, you are unlikely to be afraid of them in most situations. (If you're in a dark alley late at night, maybe it's a different story ...)



Dogs do not have this reasoning capability, and they do not generalize well. An adult dog that has met only a very few people in his life will likely be fearful of a new person he has not met before. Dogs that are poorly socialized are likely to lead a life full of anxiety, and their quality of life is poor. In addition, when confronted with a person, animal or object they are unfamiliar with, they have a strong “fight or flight” response. If flight is not an option, they are likely to respond with aggression, which may result in euthanasia.

On the other hand, puppies when they are young are naturally forgiving of new experiences, as long as they don't come to harm. A primary goal of most puppy classes is to expose your pup to as many people, other puppies, sights, sounds and experiences as possible. The instructors at your puppy class may have your pup walk through obstacle courses or walk across unfamiliar surfaces. They may pop balloons or make other strange noises. You might sit in a circle and pass all the puppies around the circle from person to person. Puppies need dozens or even hundreds of these encounters. When they occur in a safe, secure setting, and nothing bad happens to your pup, he will learn to naturally trust new things, rather than growing up fearful.

By taking your pup to puppy kindergarten, you can help instill in him a sense of trust in the world around him so he can grow up to be a happier dog.



Puppy Play-Time

Throughout his life, your pup will likely encounter many other dogs, and you want him to be well-behaved when this happens. You have probably seen dogs when they encounter one another. They engage in a complex sequence of eye contact, sniffing and posturing that will determine the nature of their relationship – who will submit to whom, under what circumstances, and what behavior will be tolerated.

Dogs are remarkably adept at establishing proper relationships with one another if they are well-socialized. But like with other interactions, this capability is not necessarily innate – it must be learned. Puppies will learn these skills to some degree by interacting with their littermates. But it takes more than that. To learn proper social skills, your pup must engage in many encounters with other dogs. As with other experiences, this is much more easily accomplished when your puppy is young, at an age where he will not seem as threatening to other dogs, and where he will be more forgiving of new experiences. Dogs that become adults without having had much exposure to other dogs often will be socially awkward. When face to face with another dog, they may not send proper signals, or they may not properly understand signals they receive. Consequently, they may be quick to act fearfully or aggressively.

A common remark by new puppy owners is, “Oh, my puppy will be socialized ... he plays with the neighbor’s dog.” This is great, but it is not enough. Happenstance encounters with one other dog will not be enough to teach your pup proper doggy etiquette. Most puppy socialization classes devote a portion of the class to allowing the puppies to play with one another. This may be as simple as sitting in a circle with the pups in the middle, doing what puppies do. They will learn a tremendous amount from one another about what will be tolerated and what will not be. For instance, this is where puppies learn bite inhibition. If one puppy nips another too hard while playing, the victim will likely yelp and disengage from playing for a short while. The nipper learns the lesson that nipping too hard causes the fun to end. He will be less likely to nip that hard in the future. There is little substitute for letting puppies learn from one another this way.





Puppy Socialization
class is a fun and easy
way to start me off on
the right paw!