

When speaking to Shari, our Senior Behaviour Trainer, we asked a simple question. “What’s one of the most important things dog owners can do for their pet?”

Her reply is an instant, “Socialise, socialise, socialise!”

While puppy socialisation is fundamental for all people bringing a new pet into their lives, it’s important that owners continue to reinforce their dog’s social skills and training throughout their lives – even as an adult dog.

One of the most common misconceptions of animal socialisation is that people believe that this means that they will be able to interact happily with other animals or people. While this would be great, a well socialised dog doesn’t necessarily mean this. It just means that they are able to cope with unfamiliar situations – normally by focussing on their human companion for a guide on how they should react.

Socialisation can help your dog’s behaviour by teaching them to not react fearfully to new experiences and assists them with being comfortable when encountering anything new. Socialisation is vital for proper mental and social development in dogs when done correctly. Mistakes in socialisation can backfire and may even produce an overly shy dog or one that reacts with aggression when scared. It’s always a good idea to get professional advice that is tailored to your pet.

To help people understand the importance of socialisation we have decided to do a three-part series for puppies, adolescent and adult dogs.

Part 1 - Puppy Socialisation (3 – 16/17 Weeks of Age)

Proactively socialising your puppy is very important. Dogs are at their most sensitive — and receptive — between what is called the '**critical socialisation period**' between approximately 3 - 16/17 weeks of age.

Your pet’s experiences during this critical period of learning and development can influence and shape their behaviour well into adulthood. During this time, it is crucial to carefully introduce a puppy to a variety of stimuli every day, and to ensure that the experiences are ALL positive. If they are not exposed to various stimuli early on in their life it can be difficult for them to accept the unfamiliar in the future.

Always make sure the environment is clean and a location where you can control what they are exposed to. We want the puppies to have positive experiences from new situations – not scare them.

Reward good behaviour with positive reinforcement. For example, treats, pats, playtime etc. to reinforce their desirable actions. It’s best to ignore bad behaviour or signal to them that it’s not appropriate. The signal could be as simple as a word command or gesture. If the bad behaviour continues, take them out of the situation and try again another time. Patience is key!

Be aware of how you're reacting. Like children, dogs observe the reactions of those around them. It's like when you see a child fall over, they often look to their parent on how they should react. Make it obvious to your dog that you enjoy the new situation or stimulus.

When socialising your puppy with other animals it's a good idea to ensure that they are friendly, healthy and up-to-date with their vaccinations. Your vet will be able let you know when it is okay to take your puppy to other environments such as the dog park.

Just remember! Be patient! The learning process can be gradual depending upon your dog's personality and background. Make sure to reward them with positive reinforcement when they remain calm or focus on you in new situations.

Want to find out more? Visit <http://www.rspca-act.org.au/services/dog-puppy-training>