

Why Dog Parks Aren't Always Ideal for Socialization

Many pet parents who frequent dog parks go there because they believe their dogs need the opportunity to socialize with other canines. But do they? How to tell if dog parks are appropriate for your pet and know when it may be best to avoid them.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Puppies who are well-socialized are much more likely to adapt to the unexpected social situations they will encounter throughout their lives
- You want your puppy to learn early how to respond, even in unexpected situations, which is why you should begin his socialization the day you bring him home
- Calm, confident, well-behaved dogs are created, not born; it's your responsibility to raise a well-adjusted puppy so he becomes a balanced, adaptable adult dog

It's impossible to overemphasize the importance of puppy socialization in creating a happy, adaptable, well-behaved adult dog. This means introducing your puppy to the world around her at a pace that isn't overwhelming. A good guideline to follow is that in her first two months with you, your pup should:

- Be introduced in a nonthreatening way to as many healthy and safe people, animals, places, situations, sights and sounds as possible (I suggest meeting at least three new living beings a day)
- Be encouraged to explore and investigate her environment, including outside, daily, with supervision
- Be exposed to lots of toys, games, surfaces, and other stimuli
- Take daily car rides with you to new, unfamiliar environments

Of course, there are several things to consider before putting your puppy "out there," such as when to do it, where to do it and who to involve for her maximum comfort and most positive learning experience.

Puppies Require Safe, Wide-Ranging Exposure to Everyday Life

In the ebb and flow of life, change is often difficult for even the most even-tempered among us. So, imagine how challenging it is for a very young puppy who finds himself in a brand-new, unfamiliar environment. While he's still impressionable, the first things your pup needs to learn are daily routines, such as:

- Where to go potty
- The location of food and water bowls
- What time(s) he's fed each day
- His "sleeping quarters" (optimally, a crate with soft bedding placed close to your own bed)

- Wake-up and bedtime rituals
- His toys vs. items he isn't allowed to play with

According to veterinarian, animal behaviorist, and dog trainer Dr. Ian Dunbar, writing for Dog Star Daily, five of the most important skills young puppies should learn are:¹

1. **Bite inhibition** — "Gentle jaws" are an important aspect of **puppy play** as well as human interaction
2. **Dog handling** — Teaching puppies to enjoy being touched by people, especially children, men, and strangers, is crucial
3. **Reliable off-leash obedience** — Puppies should promptly obey verbal commands, even when distracted
4. **Housetraining** — Teaching them where to go is arguably one of the most desirable skills
5. **Preventing hyperactivity** — Just as children learn "indoor voices," puppies need to learn that it's great to run, leap and play — outside, not inside

Helping your puppy get used to and not be startled by different sights and sounds, such as the television, a passing ambulance, thunder and lightning, a bicyclist, a lawnmower, and many other aspects of life you hardly notice, may take patience until she knows she's safe.

Before long, you can have people over to play and interact with her, especially people of different ages and genders. Occasional play dates with other dogs and puppies, or even cats and a variety of other animals will also be helpful.

In addition, get your puppy used to hygiene and grooming routines — not just trips to the vet or groomer, but having her teeth brushed, her coat combed, her ears cleaned, and her nails trimmed. These are activities that can be annoying or even frightening for dogs who weren't exposed to them as puppies.

Puppy Classes and Beyond

Your puppy and later, your adult dog will likely encounter a wide variety of situations outside your home — many of which you probably never considered. A good foundation for building his confidence is a puppy class setting in which your little guy gets opportunities to learn from and interact with other puppies that aren't his littermates. Just a few examples of real-life situations your pup must learn to navigate:

- The temptation of food placed on a table or kitchen counter
- **Veterinary visits**
- Overly friendly and unfriendly dogs
- Rambunctious children
- Unfamiliar adults who pet without permission
- Noisy outdoor events

These are just a handful of scenarios your puppy or dog will encounter in life, and the goal is to give him the tools he needs to react appropriately even in unexpected situations.

If your pup doesn't have the opportunity for a variety of social encounters, including frequent positive interactions with other puppies, dogs, and people, he'll have no frame of reference when new situations arise. He can become skittish and fearful or feel threatened and react defensively.

When It's Show Time, Go Slow and Steady

When socializing a puppy (or a dog for that matter), it's important to start the process gradually. It's vitally important she feels secure in her immediate environment before venturing into the unknown. It's important she has a foundation of security in her relationship with you before unexpected events occur.

Don't immediately put your pup in a potentially problematic situation if you have no idea how she'll react. This might be a dog park, an outdoor concert, or a family gathering at the lake. As one trainer wrote, to do so is comparable:

*"... [T]o taking a brand-new student driver onto the interstate and then trying to explain gear shifts, turn signals and left and right pedals — all at 65 mph. It's essential to have skills under stress; therefore, you have to learn them before you're under stress."*²

Most veterinarians agree that for a puppy, the most critical developmental stage generally falls between 4 and 16 weeks. If you're unsure about whether you should enroll your pup in some kind of training class before she's undergone a full battery of vaccinations, there are a few other things to think about.

Early Socialization, or Timely Immunization?

A study at California-based UC Davis School of Veterinary medicine involving around 1,000 puppies found that already-vaccinated 16-week-old or younger puppies who attended socialization classes were under no greater risk of contracting parvovirus than puppies who didn't get the vaccination.³

The upshot of the study was that, because a well-socialized puppy is far more inclined to be a balanced, easy-to-get-along-with dog, opt for the class. As a matter of fact, most veterinarians believe the risk of a partially immunized puppy contracting some type of infection while attending training classes is slim.

In an interview for veterinary magazine *dvm360*, Dr. Kersti Seksel, managing director of Sydney Animal Behaviour Service in Sydney, Australia notes that:

*"Well-run puppy classes undoubtedly provide the basis for happy, healthy dogs and happy owners. The risks of a puppy's exposure to infectious agents always need to be considered, but the risk of being euthanized or surrendered is much greater in unsocialized, untrained dogs than the risk of dying from infectious diseases."*⁴

And according to Dr. Jennifer Messer, director of the City of Ottawa Spay and Neuter Clinic in Ontario, Canada:

*"Even with the improved efficacy of **parvovirus** vaccine technology developed in the mid-1990s, about 2% to 8% of puppies may not be adequately protected from parvovirus until after they have been vaccinated at 14 to 16 weeks old."*

*This percentage is relatively small, but it can't be ignored, and it must be balanced against the serious behavioral risks of holding puppies back from class until they are fully vaccinated."*⁵

My recommendation is to find a well-run puppy play group (preferably before you bring puppy home) where all of the pups have visited the vet for a wellness check and are healthy. This is the safest scenario for healthy socialization. Avoid walking in the woods (or areas where wildlife frequent) or visiting dog parks until the puppy's immune system is more developed (usually after 4 months of age).

From 6 to 16 weeks of age it's very important to find safe, fun puppy classes. Attending play groups with very young puppies also has invaluable benefits. Once the puppy is old enough, begin your first positive training class. I recommend staying in fear-free training classes until your growing dog's behavior makes you very proud. For most of my canine patients this means attending obedience classes throughout their first year of life.

Putting the effort into early training and socialization sets the stage for the rest of your pup's life. Unsocialized and untrained dogs have a much more stressful, confusing, and risky existence, for all sorts of reasons. The best gift you can give your puppy is the ability to adapt, understand and enjoy life with you; this occurs through intentional planning and positive training on your part. Don't let your pup down!

Sources and References

¹ [Dr. Ian Dunbar, Dog Star Daily, January 5, 2009](#)

² [Karen Pryor Clicker Training, February 4, 2013](#)

³ [dvm360, November 1, 2013](#)

^{4,5} [dvm360, December 1, 2009](#)
