

It's never too late to socialize

With patience and practice your adopted dog can become a well-adjusted companion.



A well-socialized canine companion is a welcome addition to any home. She learns to live in her daily surroundings with proper behavior and without fear. No matter what age you adopt your new dog, taking the appropriate steps to socialize her is key to a happy union. Patience is critical, as is keeping socialization exercises positive and rewarding, especially for an adopted dog with an unknown history.

The easiest time to socialize puppies is before they reach 4 months of age. But that's not to say it can't be accomplished later in life.

"With older dogs who have missed out on this, your main tools for remedial socialization are desensitization and counter-conditioning," says Trish McMillan, senior manager of animal behavior with the ASPCA in New York. "It can be done — all behavior can be changed — but if they missed the critical socialization period as puppies, you'll likely need more support, and it'll take longer."

The trick is to assume nothing, and treat every new event as a positive learning experience, regardless of your dog's age. Take her places, and have everyone you meet — even the postal worker or the café patron — give her a treat and a scratch behind the ears. Keep everything positive and easygoing, and begin immediately, the moment you get her home.

"Every moment you are with your dog, she is learning," McMillan says.

Enroll in a training class, no matter how obedient your dog is. This accomplishes so much: bonding time, establishing rules, and interacting with other dogs and their owners.

Socializing a puppy is quite a bit easier, but still requires commitment. Be careful about where you

take your pup before her initial vaccine regimen is complete, but you can — and should — explore non-threatening places such as houses without dogs, malls, outdoor cafés, and any other places your dog can be taken in a carrier.

"It's perfectly safe to carry puppies in your arms or in a carrier to introduce them to people, traffic, car rides — all the things they're going to see in the course of their lives," McMillan says. "We do this all the time with the ASPCA puppies, even while they're still nursing."

The more pleasant encounters she has, the better she'll be as an adult. Aim to greet people from every age, race, and gender group. Malls are excellent places for this. Avoid dog parks, grass outside your vet's office, yards housing unknown dogs, and other possibly contaminated areas. Talk to your vet first about any concerns you might have.

If your dog is fearful when exposed to something new, go slower until she's comfortable. Always pair encounters with something enjoyable like her favorite toy or a treat to help her form positive associations with this new experience. Get to know your dog. Watch how she reacts to things around her. Some breeds are genetically programmed to be social butterflies, while others are a bit more jumpy and anti-social.

As always, if problems are severe or overwhelming, call a professional.

Just because you don't know your adopted dog's history doesn't mean she can't be trained to become an even-tempered and ideal companion. It takes patience, love, and nurturing to help her see the joy in the world around her, but it can be done, at any age. ■

