

The Magic Pill for Puppies

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Imagine: You are standing in the veterinarian's office with your pup. The doctor tells you that there is a new medication that prevents the leading cause of death in dogs. You have to give it once a day for eight weeks, it doesn't have any negative side effects, it is free, and it is proven to work.

Would you give it? I would! This is your lucky day; because there *is* a magic pill that does all of that and more! It will help prevent aggression, thunderstorm phobia and other behavioral disorders. But there's no reason to call for the magic pill. You already have it. It's socialization!

Socialization is the process by which an animal learns to relate to the stimuli in its environment, including other animals, people, places, and things. To understand how and when to socialize your puppy, you should first understand the sensitive period for socialization (3-14 weeks of age).

A sensitive period is a time when a small amount of work or no work at all can have a large impact on the dog's future behavior. During this special time, puppies are most easily socialized to stimuli. This means that the puppy is more likely to approach something that scares her when she is between 8 and 14 weeks old when compared to puppies outside of this period. The door for socialization doesn't close at 14 weeks for every puppy. Depending on the breed of dog, it may be shorter or longer. It is best to continue with socialization until your pup is about eight months old, when the second fear period should be about over.

Do the math:

Socialization = less behavior problems later in life

No socialization = negative exposure = increased likelihood of behavior problems

Of course, life is not as black and white as all that. Each pup has a genetic destiny which will affect her behavioral development. However, more times than not, the math holds true. In other words, protecting the puppy by sheltering her until her vaccinations are completed will actually hurt her! Often, the problem behaviors which result from a lack of exposure at a young age don't become apparent until the dog reaches social maturity (1-3 years). By that time, you are treating a behavior problem, not socializing. Trust me; it is a lot harder to treat a behavioral disorder than it is to prevent it.

But don't take my word for it; look at the studies which support socialization. Examples of just some of the findings on socialization are below.

1. Puppies who attended early learning and socialization classes from 7-12 weeks were more likely to be retained in their original homes when compared with pups that did not.
2. Puppies who are well socialized are likely to learn more quickly, are able to problem solve more effectively in new situations, and have lower emotionality and earlier maturation of their EEG (measure of the brain patterns or electrical activity of the brain) when compared to unsocialized puppies of the same age.
3. If puppies are kept in a deprived environment until 20 weeks, they are more likely to exhibit anti-social behavior. It is difficult for these pets to become well-behaved family pets because they are

slower to learn, more reactive (have intense emotional reactions to small stimuli), don't understand how to play with other dogs and are difficult to train.

Even now, when I read the findings about socialization, it blows my mind. The brain actually develops more quickly when you socialize a pup. Puppies are smarter, braver, less emotional and more social. And when not socialized, they are the opposite!

But wait, it isn't as easy as it seems. As my old boss used to say, "Radosta, it's not about practice, it's about perfect practice." For socialization, it's about positive practice. Make sure that each exposure is positive.

One easy way to socialize pups is to take them to puppy class. Pups should be enrolled in a positive reinforcement puppy socialization class one week after they receive their first vaccination and deworming. Your doctor may grapple with the idea of whether or not to recommend puppy classes before their vaccination series is complete because of the risk of contracting an infectious disease. Fortunately, science is again on our side, because a recent study shows that pups in puppy socialization classes are no more likely to contract parvovirus than pups who don't go to class. That is my experience as well.

Not all classes are created equal. Choose your class carefully. These classes are not about teaching specific behaviors, but about exposing the pup to stimuli. They should be positive reinforcement only. Jerking puppies around on choke chains and pinch collars is not socialization. Make sure that the class is held in an indoor area which is cleaned with a bleach solution before and after classes, the puppies are screened for illness, and that there is a specific place for pottyng. Puppy class instructors should verify that all puppies have received at least one combo vaccination and deworming at least seven days prior to the start of class. Each week, the attendees should bring a copy of their pup's most recent veterinary visit to ensure that all pups are kept up to date on vaccinations.

If you are a go-getter, you can socialize your pup without a class. Take your pup on field trips five days a week. Seek out places where you can expose her to all kinds of stimuli at low risk of disease. Avoid places like the dog beach, dog park, or pet supply stores until your puppy has her last set of vaccinations (generally 16 weeks) and has been dewormed at least two times. Dogs who go to these places are not screened prior to entry so there is no way to guarantee their health or behavior.

I know what some of you are thinking: "I have had dogs before and I didn't socialize them. Why do I have to do it now?" Maybe you did socialize them and you didn't know it. If your kids were young or social, you may have taken your dog along to events, the school pick up line, or let her play with dogs and kids in your neighborhood. If you didn't and your dog was truly unafraid, you got lucky! But lightning rarely strikes twice, so get up and get to work!

You can find more information on socialization on the Resources page of my website, [Florida Veterinary Behavior Service](#).



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