

Socialization Plan for Puppies in Rescue Groups or Foster Homes

Animal shelters and kennel environments are less than ideal living situations for puppies. Because the puppies are not living with a family or in the comfort of a home, shelters are inherently stressful and generally are not good places for puppy socialization. Most shelter staff are very busy and they often don't have much time to interact with pets in the shelter.



So, puppies should spend as little time in shelters as possible.

To provide puppies with the best possible care, shelters that do not have an extensive socialization and disease control program should have a network of foster homes or rescue groups to which they can send puppies for care and socialization.

A puppy's primary socialization period, the period of life when it is most important to expose him to people and other dogs, is between 3 and 13 weeks. However, when a puppy arrives at your shelter, you often don't know how or if a puppy was socialized to other dogs or people. So, in a shelter, intensive efforts at socialization should be extended to 20 weeks. Though problems may have already developed in a puppy you meet for the first time at 14 weeks of age, there is a good chance that you can reduce the negative impact of his early experiences by implementing a comprehensive positive socialization plan while the puppy is still young.

Positive interactions. While socialization to people and dogs is crucial for a puppy, it is also important that these interactions are positive. Puppies need to learn how to play, but they also need to learn how not to play if another dog or person signals that they don't wish to play. Both of these lessons should be positive experiences for puppies. You don't want pups to be exposed to dogs or humans who might harshly reprimand, bite, injure, or significantly frighten them.

Exposure to dogs. During weeks 3-7 of life, puppies form their attachments to other dogs. Puppies between three and seven weeks of age must be kept with at least one other puppy and, ideally, their mother. Finding foster parents who can take care of an entire litter and their mother is vastly better for the puppies than splitting them up. Sending pups from the same litter to foster homes in groups of two or three is acceptable; sending them to a foster home without other pups during this time period is not recommended. There are exceptions to this rule, though. For instance, a mother dog who is very aggressive toward humans is likely teaching her pups to behave fearfully toward humans, so she might not be the best role model in this regard.

Orphaned puppies should be isolated from all other puppies and adult dogs with compromised immune systems for a 14-day quarantine period, and then put in a group

of puppies of similar size and age. Ideally, orphaned pups should be sent to a foster home that has multiple friendly (and vaccinated) adult dogs so that the puppy can socialize with other dogs.

Puppies over seven weeks old should receive exposure to other puppies (ideally of similar ages, in puppy groups or classes) and adult dogs. As mentioned above, it is important for puppies to learn how to play with other dogs, and how to inhibit play behavior when a dog tells them she doesn't wish to join in. Interacting with "foster-parent dogs" (adult dogs who will reprimand but won't hurt puppies) is crucial in the first 13 weeks of life if the puppies are not raised with their mother. Orphaned puppies under 13 weeks should receive several hours per day with a foster-parent dog who will appropriately reprimand them when needed. They should also receive a minimum of 30 minutes of playtime per day with other dogs – preferably puppies of the same age, but adult dogs are fine if they are playful and like to interact with puppies.

Quarantine period. How much "street exposure" should you give your foster puppy? Because puppies are vulnerable to certain diseases (such as parvo, distemper, and hepatitis), they shouldn't be taken out in public until they have had two or three vaccines – after 12 weeks of age. Even before vaccinations are complete, however, you can begin socializing your pup. When the puppy is eight weeks old, other animals who are healthy, vaccinated and friendly can come to your home, and you can work on socializing your puppy to them.

After you have your veterinarian's blessing to take the puppy out into the world, you can introduce the pup to the delights of going for walks in the neighborhood or to the park, and visiting other people's homes.

Exposure to people. Lots of positive exposure to people is the most important part of puppy socialization. There are several aspects of human exposure that must be provided: interaction with different types of people (young, old, short, tall, calm, boisterous, etc.), training (to teach pups to interact with humans politely and appropriately), and independent interaction (away from other puppies). Puppies start learning how to be independent from the other pups in their litter during their socialization period.

Puppies should spend a minimum of three hours per day (ideally, most of the day) with their foster person. This interaction should include:

- *Play:* Puppies should learn how to play with people – that is, they need to know what is and isn't appropriate play behavior. They should be taught that playing with toys is fun and rewarding, while biting or mouthing people never results in an encouraging response from a human.
- *Quiet time:* Puppies must learn to enjoy petting, cuddling and calm interactions. If a puppy is not able to calm down, he needs more exercise and playtime.
- *Training:* Puppies can start learning at a young age how to interact politely with humans. Training puppies to sit on cue when they want something is very easy to do and teaches the pups how to work with people to get what they want in life. Retrieve training is also very easy with many puppies (even before 14 weeks); it teaches pups to share and enjoy fun, positive interactions with people.

Puppies should also receive exposure to lots of different people. Puppies should meet and briefly interact with a minimum of five new people per day.

Alone time. To teach them that it is normal and appropriate to be left alone, puppies over eight weeks should have some “alone time” every day. Start with a short absence, not a long stretch of time. After giving the puppy enough exercise to tire him out, leave him alone with a food-dispensing toy in his puppy-safe enclosure. You can also put the pup in the kitchen with a baby gate preventing access to the rest of the house. Provide toys and “pee pads.” Gradually work up to leaving the puppy alone for longer periods of time.