

socializing your hunting puppy

There is more to rearing a happy, outgoing dog than merely providing him with food, shelter and love.

When you buy a puppy, you shoulder responsibilities you may not have expected, and the one that is very often neglected is socialization.

Let's say you are bringing home that versatile puppy you couldn't pass up, the one with the pedigree you've dreamed of. You want a hunting dog of course, but you also plan that your dog will share your house with you and your family. You are enormously proud of your puppy and want your family and friends to see how truly wonderful a dog can be when they visit you: as good with people as he is on birds.

If you think you can rear a sociable puppy by putting him into his kennel until you get around to working with him, think again! While some purebred dogs have the happy temperament to survive this kind of neglect, most do not. How would you react if you were confined to your room and yard while you were growing up, and then suddenly taken into a room full of people? Chances are you would be overwhelmed. A puppy that is kept in his kennel and yard, who's not given a chance to meet new people and dogs or experience new situations, is apt to grow up over-protective and shy.

Socialization means introducing your puppy to new sights, sounds and people from the minute you take him home. From about age eight weeks to twelve weeks, puppies go through a critical fear period. I find it better for my pups to keep the litter together for a least ten weeks so that the pups have each other for reassurance when I socialize them. If you take a puppy from his littermates before this fear period is over, you should plan to keep him as safe from bad experiences as possible. Limit your teaching to simple commands and make sure your discipline is firm but gentle. Your puppy is learning to trust humans, and to live in a human-centered world as part of his new pack. He is also learning to learn.

Introduce your puppy to people first. Children are the best socializers available, so if you don't have any around the house, invite some neighborhood children over to romp with your puppy. Have friends in to meet this wonderful pup you've acquired.

After ten weeks of age, your pup should have his second round of shots so he can meet select dogs whose shots are also up to date. (His shots will not completely protect him until he is eighteen weeks old.) Until he has full protection, plan to entertain a lot. It will be fun for you and for your puppy. Take him to a nursing home after about ten weeks of age, and to the mall and



Hanna and Merrymeeting's Tera. Photo by Patti Carter.

playground after fourteen weeks. Be sure that he gets comfortable with very young children. Sign him up for puppy kindergarten class to give him a head start on obedience. Everybody loves a puppy. You will be rewarded with an outgoing pet that is comfortable with both people and other dogs.

Your puppy doesn't deliberately get into mischief, and doesn't yet know when he's doing wrong. Vigorous verbal or physical reprimands when he is too young to know the rules of the house could shatter his faith in human friends. Be kind and consistent.

During the thirteenth to the sixteenth week, some puppies will attempt to establish themselves as the dominant being in their new family "pack." Do not allow your puppy to get away with dominant behavior. Dogs like to know their position in the pack, and very few of them truly want to be the boss. Learn how to do a "dominance down." Do it kindly but firmly to your puppy as a matter of course and, by all means, do it immediately if your pup shows signs of trying to write new rules for your household.

If you are fortunate enough to live near a off-lead socialization group, take part in it with your puppy when his shots protect him.

If you have a well-socialized older dog that is part of your family pack, take him along to give your puppy confidence in approaching a new group of dogs, and to prevent bad experiences. Most older dogs will look after the welfare of their youngster if a bully is present. Keep your eyes open and you will observe how subtle dog's interaction is, and how effectively they structure their society.

Some North American Versatile Hunting Dog Association (NAVHDA) chapters have formed socialization groups with great success. Their training area has a safe, secluded field where the dogs can socialize before training sessions. They take the precaution of asking new members about potential aggression problems in their dogs before they meet the other dogs, and they introduce new dogs to the group on lead to be sure there will be no fighting. After they are sure that all dogs are feeling mellow about each other, they allow the dogs to play together in the field or take the group for a short run. Each member is responsible for the discipline of his or her own dog.

Chapter socialization periods serve two functions: they allow dogs to get comfortable when interacting with dogs of different breeds, and they drain off some of the dog's energy. After playing with other dogs, you will find your dog to be more relaxed and amenable to training.

By Helene S. Moore. Printed by permission.
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