

The Importance of Interaction: Three Perspectives on Socializing our Dogs

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Diagnosis: Unsocialized by Jill Posanski, Humane Officer

Most anyone can recognize well-trained, well socialized dogs. But getting a dog to that point takes a lot of time, and failing to make that time commitment causes a lot of dogs to lose their homes. All dogs come with individual personalities that shine through their level of training and socialization - or lack thereof.

For example, think of the famous Marley of "Marley and Me." This dog qualified as "untrained" and "overly energetic," amongst other traits. He loved people so much he literally tackled them with affection. He didn't do well around other dogs for social reasons, and he destroyed walls for anxiety reasons. Marley was lucky; his family worked with trainers to modify his behavior, retraining their approach to him. And, for some of his quirks, they chose to just accept and accommodate them.

As a humane officer, I come across many dogs that lack socialization. One obvious type is the "fear-biter." This dog is a loving family pet for the most part. The fear-biter would never act out if the family lived in a bubble with no visitors and everyday passed routinely! Unfortunately, these dogs are often sheltered by the family and "protected" from the things that scare them, so the issues are never addressed. (Cesar Milan would probably say their "human pack leader never moved them into a healthier state of being.") When something out of the ordinary happens these dogs react the only way they know how, by snapping at what they fear.

My opinion is that these problems stem from four main sources: 1) Lack of socializing at any age, 2) bad or anxious behavior being rewarded (lack of discipline), 3) animal and breed instincts not being met, and 4) lack of exercise. Address these issues, and usually the outcome is a mentally sound dog: relaxed - because he knows his place, and respectful - because he is taking his direction from a calm, assertive handler. If the owner doesn't take the lead, the dog will react to that lack of leadership. Some will react in an aggressive manner or will become painfully timid, but most give themselves a job: some of the more undesirable jobs I've seen dogs assigning to themselves are nipping and herding kids, visitors or other pets; destroying property; excessively barking at everything or a particular thing; hauling their human around on walks; guarding doors, furniture, food or people;...the list goes on and on.

So, we have identified a problem! Now, in the spirit of Dog Bite Prevention Week (May 18-24), let's hear about ways to avoid problems in the first place and how to work through existing issues.

Continued...

An Ounce of Prevention... *by Khris Erickson, Humane Educator*

So many times as a dog trainer and shelter employee I hear the words “he doesn’t like (blank), we think he was abused.” Actually, most fearful dogs weren’t physically abused, but they suffer from a lack of socialization during their critical socialization period – the time during their development when they are more open to new experiences and they learn what a normal environment is.

At a certain point the critical socialization period ends, and animals become fearful and wary of unfamiliar things in their environment. It’s a great strategy for a wild animal’s survival, but it means that extra work needs to be done for our domestic dogs. The socialization period, from about 3 weeks of age to between 16 and 20 weeks of age (depending on the breed and the individual dog – and genetics can also factor in!), has a tremendous impact on how their innate temperament will develop. The biggest gift a new puppy owner can give their dog is socialization. Socialization isn’t about the dog just getting to know your household, it’s about meeting many new individuals so that the puppy understands that strangers aren’t scary.

When socializing a puppy it’s important to make sure that the puppy is having a positive experience. If the puppy is afraid or uncomfortable, the worst thing you can do is force him to allow people to pet him. Instead, have people assume a non-threatening position by squatting or sitting on the floor, and allow the puppy to approach on his own terms. Have people toss treats so that the puppy learns that strangers can be associated with good things.

Puppy socialization classes are also a great way to socialize your puppy to other dogs. Your multiple-dog household isn’t enough: many puppies come through my classes that are terrified of the other puppies in class, even though they’ve played rough and tumble with the other dog at home. But usually during the first or second class they learn to enjoy playtime with the other pups.

A puppy should be socialized to different genders, body types, races and ages during the critical socialization period. A puppy socialized only to women may end up being afraid of men and children, and a puppy not socialized to men with beards may end up being afraid of men with facial hair.

Don’t ignore socialization to new environments as well. If you live in the suburbs or a rural area, take your puppy to a high traffic area so he gets used to busy streets - take treats along to reassure your dog to not be afraid during this experience. If you only have carpeting in your house, be sure your puppy has some experiences walking on hardwood or tile flooring – it’s not uncommon for people to have problems with their dogs not coping well to a change in flooring later in life! Lawn mowers, bicycles, wheelchairs and skateboards are examples of everyday things that you should expose your pup to during this critical period.

Again, remember that genetics do have an impact on temperament as well as environmental influences, so even a well socialized dog can have fear or aggression issues later in life. But proper socialization at a young age will reduce the seriousness of these issues and create a better foundation for training later on.

...Or A Pound of Cure *by Ginny Marchel, Animal Behaviorist/Trainer*

This article may be coming too late for some – you may not even have had your dog as a pup. But, the good news is you CAN teach an old dog new tricks! Jack’s story is proof:

Jack had been in a breeder's kennel for 5-6 months of his young life. He was privately sold to a couple, and within 2 days they came to me for assistance. This dog came in for his first session at HAWS on his belly, full of fear! He had no idea of what it meant to be on a leash, no idea of basic commands, he didn't know things we take for granted like walking up and down stairs. He also had not been neutered, which was one of the first things I suggested they take care of.

We started out with private sessions. At the first session we had to physically stand him up. If he could have asked me to turn invisible, he would have. Jack was completely shut down and didn't respond to food or treats of any kind. The owners' "homework" after this first meeting was to work on simple things – get Jack to respond to his name, at the very least by turning to look at them. Jack was to wear a leash at all times – dragging it behind him if necessary to get used to the feel of something around his neck. Also the owners were to concentrate on not making any sudden movements or loud noises around their dog.

By session two Jack was making eye contact, and showing more comfort around casual movements, but he was still worried when a voice came over the HAWS intercom. This time I sent the owners home to do what I call "confidence work" – stepping over things on the ground, basic obedience and commands, making eye contact. I asked them to do some touch massage with Jack to show him that their placing their hands on him was okay. The owners were also told to find THE treat that Jack would respond to. They were to both do these things with him so he didn't just respond to one of them.

We created a monster! Jack totally came out of his shell – ironically, when he is at HAWS for class he respects it as "school" but at the dog park he now has the tendency to be protective. This isn't unusual – these dogs can become fearful of new people in their home since this is their comfort zone. So, the owners are still working on techniques to build his confidence with new situations – and will need to do this for the lifetime of the dog.

I see unsocialized behavior often in the dogs surrendered to our shelter. So, we'll do a little "rehab" work with them: I'll find another dog at the shelter that is a right match to mentor the dog, and we'll work with them together. We'll concentrate on the confidence work like basic obedience and do lots of handling, all along reinforcing the "good" behaviors. And, when it is time to introduce these dogs to a potential dog sibling already living in an adopter's home, we go through a step by step process – part of which is the potential new owner's responsibility: they must make sure their current dog is calm beforehand! A calm dog is a happy dog – worried, unsocial dogs become emotionally charged, and so will the situation.

Working on socialization is important throughout your dog's life. At home, any owner can do confidence work with their pet. Teach your dog to make eye contact. Do basic obedience, train them to do tricks, or try agility work. Lay a maze of objects on the ground that the dog must walk over or maneuver through. Show them the way to confidence, comfort, and trust!