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## Puppy Socialization

Socializing puppies pays dividends for animals and people alike. Breeders who take the necessary steps to properly socialize their puppies make a positive investment in their business that not only benefits the welfare of their animals but also provides the people who buy their puppies with healthy, well-adjusted pets.

### Question. What is socialization?

**Answer.** Socialization is the process by which puppies learn the skills needed to mature into normal adult dogs. Proper puppy socialization allows puppies to learn how to explore and become accustomed to their surroundings, and it also allows them to learn how to get along with littermates, puppies from outside their litters, older dogs, other animal species and people. Only through proper socialization can puppies become loving, confident and trainable pets.

### Q. Why is puppy socialization important in a commercial dog breeding facility?

**A.** Raising socialized, healthy and trainable puppies is certainly better for the welfare of the animals. But it is also better from a business standpoint because it will help you to more effectively promote your kennels and increase sales. Failure to properly socialize puppies during their time at your breeding kennel may lead to behavioral problems for the puppies. The dog breeding industry relies heavily on customer satisfaction, so happy customers are better

for business. When owning a pet leads to subsequent problems, the animal is often abandoned or relinquished to an animal shelter, and the unhappy customer may never acquire another pet. Unhappy customers are known to share their negative experiences with friends and family, which hurts the entire dog breeding industry.

### Q. Is puppy socialization a regulatory requirement?

**A.** No. Socialization is good for the puppies, good for the future owners of these pets and good for the kennel industry, but it is *not* a regulatory requirement. USDA Inspectors will never write a citation for "improper socialization."

### Q. What are some things that I can do as a breeder to help promote the socialization of my puppies?

**Before birth** – Puppies can be affected by the health and stress levels of their mother. Increased stress in the mother may lead to miscarriages, low birth rates, increased susceptibility to disease and learning difficulties in the puppies. Ways to decrease the stress levels in your breeding dogs include: maintaining proper air quality throughout your kennel; maintaining proper temperature/humidity levels; avoiding overcrowding; and assuring the overall health of your breeding dogs *before* breeding takes place.

**Birth to 3 weeks** – The brain, spinal cord and nerves of the puppy are not yet fully developed during this stage. Neurologic development can be positively influenced during this 3-week window by touch, temperature and the position of the puppy's

body. When necessary, tail docking and dewclaw removal (3 - 5 days of age) usually take place during this stage of development, but this potentially painful procedure should *not* be the only handling experience that the puppies receive from humans during this stage. Ideally, you should gently handle your puppies in a positive manner every day that they remain in your kennel.

**3 weeks to 16 weeks** – This period in the puppy's life is critical for developing social relationships with humans and other animals. It is important for the puppy to belong to a known and secure social group – *the mother and littermates*. Studies show that puppies separated from their mother and littermates at 4 - 5 weeks of age grow up to have more behavioral problems than those separated at 8 weeks. These behavioral problems include excessive barking, fearfulness on walks, fear of noises, destructive behavior, toy possessiveness and food guarding – the last two of which can lead to dogs biting people.

**Q. How can I make sure my puppies are socialized?**

**A.** Here are some important things you can do:

- *Touch every puppy every day in a positive manner.*
  - Start by gently touching and petting the puppy.
  - Always talk to the puppy in a low-volume, calm voice.
  - Gently open its mouth to inspect its teeth, tongue and throat.
  - Gently touch all four feet and look inside both ears.
  - Gently brush the puppy.
- Make sure the puppies walk and play on different walking surfaces (grass, gravel, dirt, sand, carpet and tile).
- Provide human interactions with males and females of different ages and appearances – including people wearing hats, sunglasses, uniforms, etc.
- Provide social interactions with dogs of different breeds and ages. (Please stay within your own established kennel population for biosecurity reasons.)

- Encourage positive – not potentially scary – contact with other types of animals such as cats, rabbits, birds, horses, etc.
- Safely introduce your puppies to unique sounds (music, singing, machinery, sprinklers, etc.).
- Safely introduce your puppies to unique objects (toys, brushes, collars, automobiles, buggies, etc.).
- Take the puppies (ideally with the mother and littermates) to *safe*, new areas or locations on your property, and let them explore and play for 5 - 10 minutes every day (exercise yards, grooming areas, your house, etc.).

**Q. So what happens after the puppies leave my kennel?**

**A.** Ideally, socialization will continue as the puppies become adjusted to their new homes. Puppies should become house-trained and learn basic obedience. They should also be taught not to bite people, as well as how to properly take walks, ride in automobiles, etc. Pet owners should be educated about their roles in the process. Breeders and pet store employees begin this process with the owners, and then it continues with each owner's veterinarian.

Remember, the success of the entire socialization process starts at your kennel while the puppies and mother are under your influence. Each stage of puppy development is a window of opportunity for you to help improve the health, quality, trainability and marketability of your puppies. A well-socialized, healthy and trainable puppy reflects well on you, and your puppies may be in greater demand as a result of your efforts.

**Additional Information**

For more information contact:  
Animal Care  
USDA, APHIS  
4700 River Road, Unit 84  
Riverdale, MD 20737  
E-mail: [ace@aphis.usda.gov](mailto:ace@aphis.usda.gov)

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