



THE CANINE BEHAVIOR SERIES

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Socializing Dogs to Places

Puppies and dogs who have never been to places other than their homes can become unable to cope with going anywhere. This becomes a serious problem when the dog needs to go to the veterinarian's office, to a specialist, or out for any other reason. Socializing to places is essential for a dog's mental health and for physical well-being, too.

Consult your veterinarian about what places are safe to take your puppy or dog. A puppy whose vaccinations are not yet complete or a dog with medical problems can be at high risk of catching a disease from going where other dogs have been. Some dogs pose more risk than others. Your veterinarian will know what diseases are going around among the dogs in your community at any given time.

Foundation Work

An orderly training class is an excellent idea for most dogs as part of their experience with places outside the home. In class you have the help of an instructor to coach you on handling your pup and also to help set up situations that will help your pup form positive beliefs about going places. Hopefully within a few sessions, you'll see your pup eager to enter the class area.

A dog needs to be healthy before starting class, and ready for outings that last longer than an hour. Your pup's first outings should probably be shorter than this. Short and sweet—the goal is to make each outing a positive experience for your dog.

Even if it's a big effort to get your dog to the place you're going for the outing, and you have to rearrange your schedule to do it, resist the urge to make the outing long. Don't try to turn what should be two or three or four outings into just one! What your dog needs is to go there multiple times and find out that each time is good. All-in-one doesn't work nearly as well.

Take your dog to a wide variety of places with a multiple characteristics. Try to notice what things your dog notices, and to make these things pleasant for the dog. Look for places that expand your dog's experiences. Here are some things to think about in choosing places to work with your dog:

- Outdoors*
- Indoors*
- Wide-open spaces*
- Closed spaces*
- Other dogs present*
- No other dogs present*
- People present*
- No people present*
- Few others there, and others appearing unexpectedly*
- Raining*
- Snow on the ground*
- Hot weather (take precautions to keep your dog safe from overheating)*
- Night time*
- Lots of noise*
- Very quiet*
- Strong smells*

Include trips to the veterinarian's office in your outings. Be sure to check with the office about the times to come when you won't be disrupting their routine. Several short trips to the office for a few treats and then on your way can make a huge difference in your dog's stress level when it's time for veterinary treatment.

Make going places more appealing to your dog by putting rewards into the trip out and the time spent at the location. Avoid rewards on the way home or after returning home, because rewarding then can cause the dog to want to get home quickly.

Good rewards will be whatever things your dog likes. These could include praise, petting, food rewards, games and time to play with favorite toys. This is a good time to use the toys your dog can only have when supervised. Such toys will tend to stay special to the dog and have a high reward value.

If your dog is timid or reluctant about places, it can help to go along with another person handling a confident dog your dog likes. Choose a dog who reduces your dog's stress and who likes going to the place you're going. Dogs will pick up positive attitudes from each other. But they will pick up negative attitudes, too, so avoid taking your inexperienced or unsure dog out with a dog who does not like going to that place.

Act confident and calm yourself, and be a good leader to your dog. Use the training skills that the two of you are working on together. If your dog is not ready to listen to you in a highly distracting situation, pick a quiet part of the outing to practice the training. As you practice in more and more distracting situations, your dog's ability will gradually improve. The maturing process helps, too.

If riding in a car makes your dog sick, take that into consideration. Work on the carsickness just as you work on any other aversion your dog has, gradually and with rewards. Try to separate socialization to places with any car rides that would make your dog arrive sick in the new place!

The Fearful Dog

If your dog has missed early socialization to places, you can still improve things. The same principles apply, and it's not really possible to predict how much progress the dog might make and how long it might take to see improvement.

The ability to cope with novel situations is both taught and inherited. Some puppies with the best early socialization may still be lifelong homebodies and always somewhat reluctant to go places. These are the dogs who would have serious problems without early socialization to places.

Some dogs who have missed out on early socialization and have never been anywhere will come around nicely when given good, positive socialization to places. A complicated combination of traits determines a dog's ability to cope. Steady nerves, just as one example, come from genetics; a mother dog with steady nerves and early handling of the puppies can instill the belief that the world is a safe place.

If your dog shows severe fears about going out, or behaves aggressively toward other dogs or humans on outings, get expert help in person. Your veterinarian can help you find a veterinary behavior specialist or other expert to help you work safely with your dog. Every time the dog acts out dangerous or seriously fearful behavior, that behavior becomes a stronger habit, so get help promptly.

Taking your dog on outings not only helps the dog learn to cope with a variety of places, but it also strengthens your bond with your dog. Training benefits by working in a variety of places, too. Whenever you take your dog out, keep in mind the goal of helping your dog learn to enjoy going new places. You will be amazed at the benefits from these happy outings.

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Kathy Diamond Davis is the author of the book Therapy Dogs: Training Your Dog to Reach Others. Should the training articles available here or elsewhere not be effective, contact your veterinarian. Veterinarians not specializing in behavior can eliminate medical causes of behavior problems. If no medical cause is found, your veterinarian can refer you to a colleague who specializes in behavior or a local behaviorist.

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