



## THE CANINE BEHAVIOR SERIES

By Kathy Diamond Davis

Author and Trainer

### **Socializing Dogs to Things**

Umbrellas, big trucks, kitchen appliances, and reclining chairs are a few of some dogs' least favorite things. When a dog's aversion to something creates a problem, such as your getting wet while trying to walk with an umbrella, you see the reason for socializing young dogs to things.

Once a dog has developed a fear, the process of working through it takes more time and effort. You may need the help of a veterinary behavior specialist who can create a behavior modification program as well as prescribe medications if indicated. (See [Fear - How to Help Your Dog Overcome It](#))

Socialization is the process of accustoming a dog to an experience in a positive or neutral fashion before the dog has developed any fear of it. We want the dog to know how to behave and to have the most comfortable feelings about that experience that we can create. We don't want our dogs to suffer from unnecessary fears.

The goal is for the dog to be able to deal with that experience whenever it might be necessary. Whatever atmosphere a dog will live or work in, you'll greatly benefit by thoroughly socializing the dog to that atmosphere as a foundation.

#### **First Impressions are Lasting Impressions**

Some people have tremendous success with almost every puppy they raise. They may not even be aware of the things they do that help their puppies grow up mentally sound, but more likely they have studied to learn those great skills.

If a puppy's first experiences are structured correctly, the first impression of an umbrella is ho-hum, just a harmless thing that's safe to ignore. The big truck may go by practically unnoticed because of the comfortable distance, and the treats or games going on are more interesting than the truck.

Kitchen appliances that could hurt a dog are handled properly around the well-raised puppy, and meals and treats happen around these appliances. The reclining chair can be a good place for snuggling if people are careful not to endanger the pup when raising or lowering the mechanism. So many of a dog's fears are REAL, based on pain and fear from early experiences the humans never even noticed. For example, it is so easy to unknowingly smack a dog in the head with a refrigerator door.

#### **Pick Your Distance**

One way to socialize puppies to things is to provide the pups with pleasant stuff (like dinner) at a distance from those things. Very gradually with successive meals, you move the thing closer to the pup or the pup closer to the thing. Moving the food dish to various locations for meals serves another purpose by teaching the dog to be flexible about eating spots. You can also feed some food by hand or place it on an object you want your dog to accept. This object could be anything, including an umbrella or a wheelchair.

You can lay a trail of treats up to the object, but keep in mind the goal is that the puppy will never react fearfully or aggressively toward the object. You're looking for calm acceptance, so don't push too close too fast.

Some things are not safe for a dog to touch (a backhoe comes to mind), and in that case it's unwise to teach your dog it's worth crawling around on that item looking for treats. When you consistently keep your dog at a safe distance from something that's unsafe to touch, you help your dog form the habit of keeping that distance.

#### **What's Special about It?**

Look at each object from a dog's point of view. What is it about this thing that could upset a dog? Is it noisy? Is it tall? Does it move a certain way? When you accustom your dog to things with these qualities, that socialization will also help the dog later to accept other things that are similar.

Recognizing the quality about an object that might bother a dog also allows you to isolate that quality with an object that's easier to obtain for practice. A dog who gets used to a rolling office chair will be closer to comfort around wheel chairs, for example.

It can help if you have the strange object around the house for a couple of weeks in order to let it become a familiar part of your dog's world. It's possible to borrow something to accomplish this.

Don't forget big hats, ladders, tote bags, duffle bags, and anything else people carry that could spook an unsophisticated dog. When you're out on walks with your dog, watch for interesting things to use to socialize. Remember not to take your dog any closer than is completely comfortable and safe for the dog.

#### **Toolbox**

The toolbox for creating trust in your dog toward things includes some tried-and-true tools:

1. Approach the object calmly and cheerfully yourself. Do not drag the dog. Keep a loose leash. If the dog stops on the way to the object but within the length of your leash, you can go on up to it and—if safe for the dog to touch—touch it and act happy.

Otherwise, try a right-angle turn and walk to the side of the object, possibly around it, at a distance comfortable for the dog, and then move on. One way to give the dog a sense of distance is to put your body between the dog and the object.

Other times you'll want the dog on the side of the object, with you using focused attention to turn the dog's eyes to you and away from the object (See [Eye Contact](#)) This allows you to control what your dog is thinking about. Pretty cool!

2. If you have another dog who behaves toward that object the way you want this dog to behave, expose the pup to the object in the presence of the more experienced dog. It's best if each dog has someone handling that dog who can properly direct the attention.

Sometimes you know another dog has a reaction toward a type of object that you do not want this puppy to pick up. In such a case, keep the puppy out of that situation when in that dog's company until the puppy has solidly attained the socialization you desire. Dogs easily pick up attitudes from other dogs, sometimes in unpredictable ways.

3. If the object is safe and the dog is calm, allow the dog to sniff it. In most cases you want to interrupt the sniffing before it progresses to tasting or other activities with the object, and this is another good time to use the focused attention exercise.
4. Use food, both treats from your hand and food from the dish at mealtimes, to make various things seem more normal and less stressful.
5. Associate your dog's favorite things with the new things you want your dog to accept. Know what your dog enjoys and finds rewarding, such as games, toys, rides, and walks. Use the things the dog already likes to create positive associations with new things.
6. Avoid overwhelming your dog with a heavy or prolonged exposure to a new or stressful thing. Don't try to do in one session what you should do in six.
7. Sometimes you can overcome a brand new fear of a thing by creating good experiences with that thing right away. Observe the dog carefully so that you don't just overwhelm the dog and set the fear more firmly. In some cases you are able to change the dog's mind about that object before the fear has time to become set.
8. Think, think, think about animated things your dog does towards objects. Does it look cute to have the dog jump and hit the TV screen while barking? It won't be cute in the future when it becomes dangerous and disruptive. Is it fun to have the dog chase a laser light? Not so fun when a dog becomes so obsessed with chasing every beam of light that medication is needed.

One reason some behaviors become addictive may be the adrenaline involved when the dog does them. That "cute" excitement is helping to build a habit. Is it a habit that will be healthy for your dog?

Look for ways your dog can be animated and sane at the same time. Retrieving is a great skill for a dog to learn and the best game to play with a dog. Chewing on safe toys is good for the dog's dental health and also helps the dog relax. A few minutes of grooming and a few minutes of training every day are great ways to keep your relationship in fine shape. Then your dog will be best able to benefit from all your good socialization work.

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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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Front Page : Library : Canine Behavior Series : Socializing Dogs to Things

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