

Puppy Socialization in the Age of Coronavirus

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Holy cow! What do we do now?

For decades, we've been told that to raise stable puppies we need to socialize them with many people of different genders, sizes, ages, races, etc. And, we were told that socialization had to be done before 16 weeks of age. That's the **only** way to ensure pups would be friendly and confident as adults.

But the world has changed due to the coronavirus and with it our rules for engaging with other people. Although dogs don't get ill from this version of the virus, there is concern that they can carry it on their coats, thus transferring it between people. Many puppy kindergarten classes are canceled and dog-training facilities are closed. If we meet people in our neighborhood or on the street, we are supposed to stay at least six feet away from them and not let our puppy interact with them. What is a puppy breeder and owner to do?

Socialization and Development is Still Essential.

Meeting and interacting with an array of people is important to the social development of young puppies. From ages 3 weeks up to 16 weeks, pups are particularly sensitive to social engagement with other dogs, people, even other pets and livestock. In ideal circumstances, we would ensure they met 50 or even 100 people during these early months. However, these aren't ideal times for anyone.

Eight Tips for Continuing to Socialize Your Puppy.

So, let's talk about eight things **we can do to raise stable, friendly pups during the Age of Coronavirus.**

1. **Focus on building your pup's trust in you and your family.** The most important lesson for pups to learn in these early months is to trust people, especially their people. During this time, focus on building that trust through teaching communication, cues, house manners, tricks, and fitness exercises. Practice these things in each room in your house and every part of your yard. Your pup's trust in you, above all else, will enable you to pick up his socialization again once this is over.
2. **Go all chameleon.** If your pup can't meet folks who look different, then change the way you look! Use masks, wigs, hats, umbrellas, cloaks, and more. Have your family play along! Pop up looking like Halloween throughout your house and property, not in a scary way but in a surprising way. Try manipulating your smell, too. You can't actually change your odor, which is very important to dogs, but you can spritz yourself with some light scent to add to the way you smell.
3. **Set up challenging, stimulating experiences at home.** Puppy brains and bodies need to be challenged during these months, so think of ways to do this at home. Create obstacle courses in your house or yard. Play scent games, hiding treats for your pup to sniff out around the house and yard. (Just remember not to violate house rules during this game, so no treats on counters.) Let your pup solve all kinds of problems (e.g., how to find you in the house and to solve dog puzzles.)
4. **Do Adventure Walks!** We may not be able to gather in groups but we can head out into the great outdoors. Make an effort to get your pup to woods, meadows, fields, beaches, and even parks. Adventure Walks enable pups to learn responsibility and problem-solving as well as develop their brain-body connection. And best of all, Adventure Walks tire pups out!
5. **Introduce your puppy to as many safe people as possible.** Most likely there will still be some safe people in your life. They might be family members, neighbors, or tenants who are staying put at home. Let your pup interact with as many people as you safely can.

6. **Let pups see people, places, and things!** Even if you can't introduce your pup directly to new people, your pup can still be introduced to the world. These indirect interactions, where pups see and hear but don't touch are very important for teaching puppies proper manners. Think through what you want your pup to do when it can see another person or dog but can't approach. Then teach that behavior to your puppy. Take short trips to let your pup see and hear whatever is happening. No doubt, life is going to be quieter for a while so this may take some effort. Look for garbage trucks, traffic, fire departments, and anything else noisy and hang out with your pup.
7. **Get your pup off your property.** Pups become location sensitive towards the end of this period, attaching them strongly to their homes and yards. Since we want our pups to be comfortable in many places, we need to get them away from the house. Drive your pup to different places in your area where people aren't congregating. Playgrounds, parks, outdoor shopping malls, and store parking lots. Take your pup for a ride in a wiped-down shopping cart. Let her jump up on park benches. Investigate the playground equipment.
8. **Emphasize handling, grooming, and examinations at home.** Most likely your pup will be doing fewer visits to the vet and groomer during the pandemic, so you have to take responsibility for teaching your pup to tolerate handling, touching, and manipulation.

Get Going

These are our suggestions for socializing pups during the Age of Coronavirus. They aren't as ideal as doing traditional socialization but it's the hand we have been dealt. Interacting with your puppy will also help you handle the stress of the current situation.

So, develop a plan and get going with your pup. Feel free to share this post with anyone you know raising a pup or puppies right now.