

Properly Socializing Your Puppy

(and the people who greet him!)

Beth Bradley

Socializing your puppy is extremely important. However, socializing your puppy in the wrong way can do more harm than good. To properly socialize your puppy, you must provide the experiences and training that will build a foundation for him to function successfully in the world he shares with you. In other words, you must teach your puppy to greet and interact with others appropriately and to remain calm and behave well in a variety of situations. Along the way, you may also need to teach some people the appropriate way to greet a puppy!

How Exciting

People tend to get excited when they see a puppy. They may squeal, giggle, jump, and rush toward your pup with arms outstretched. They want to hold, squeeze, and cuddle your pup. They may hold him up to look into those big adorable eyes. If the person has a dog, they may encourage the dog to approach your puppy to “make friends.” The trouble is, all that noise, movement, physical interaction, and eye contact can be overwhelming to your puppy. A shy puppy will be startled and intimidated and will try to retreat or hide. An outgoing puppy will become overexcited and will jump and bark. Neither response is appropriate or desirable. To be fair, however, your pup is responding to a greeting that was also inappropriate. From a canine perspective, a loud, direct approach is not “face-to-face,” it is “in-your-face.”

As your puppy’s leader, you are also his teacher and protector. You are responsible for ensuring that his early experiences are appropriate, manageable, and help him learn the social skills he needs.

Lessons Learned

Your puppy learns about the world from his early experiences. What does your puppy learn when you allow people to overwhelm him?

- 1) He learns to anticipate that the approach of a new person or dog is followed by an aggressive greeting.
- 2) He learns that you, his leader, will not prevent these overwhelming experiences.
- 3) He learns that he must deal with these situations in his own way.

These are not lessons you want your pup to learn!

A shy puppy will initially retreat when overwhelmed. Over time, he will escalate his efforts to communicate to others that he does not want to interact. He will growl, bark, and eventually bite. If you, as his leader, fail to prevent early overwhelming experiences, your puppy will learn to take matters into his own hands (or teeth, as the case may be.) An outgoing puppy will jump, wiggle, and bark when overwhelmed and overexcited by a boisterous greeting. This behavior will be reinforced by the attention he gets for acting this way. If you, as his leader, do not intervene, he will eventually jump, bark, and pull on his leash whenever he sees another person or dog because his early experiences taught him that this is appropriate greeting behavior. As your puppy ages, he will develop frustration when he cannot reach and greet every passing dog and person. His frustration will intensify his reactions and he may begin to bark, stand on his back legs, and bite the leash.

Baby Steps for Baby Dogs

Providing your puppy with opportunities to observe and experience a variety of people, places, and activities is key to developing a happy, properly socialized adult dog. However, you must remember not to overwhelm your puppy or allow him to be overwhelmed by others. Take your puppy to as many places as you can, but don't force him to interact with people or other dogs. He is a baby, so let him take baby steps.

- Begin with walks on quiet streets in your neighborhood. Work up gradually to more stimulating events and experiences. Whenever it is practical, bring his crate so he has a safe spot where he can get away from the action.
- Do not hesitate to explain to people the proper way to greet your pup. A puppy should be greeted on his own level, not from above. Tell the person to get down on one knee or sit on the ground. Allow your puppy time to smell and look at a new person before the person greets him or tries to touch him. Touching, petting and talking should be calm and gentle. Direct eye contact is seen as a challenge and should be avoided. The pup should not be permitted to jump on the person or bite or mouth the person.

Managing your puppy's early experiences allows him to develop confidence and control. He will greet unfamiliar people, dogs, and situations calmly and confidently, because he has learned that you, as his leader, do not let things get out of control.

Conclusion

Your puppy's early experiences will shape how he views and responds to the world as an adult dog. Remember, these early interactions will shape your dog's behavior later in life. If he becomes overwhelmed, he will grow to believe he must handle things in his own way—and puppies are not known for their good judgment.

Do not be embarrassed to explain to people what is and is not permitted. If you feel a person's energy is too high, ask them not to reach for, stare at, or bend over your puppy. Even a short interaction has a lasting effect. You will be sharing your life with your dog for many years—you have the right and the responsibility to ensure that each experience and interaction helps mold your puppy into the confident, well-mannered adult dog you want him to be.

About Beth Bradley

As one of the top professional trainers and competitors in the United States, Beth is committed to improving the lives of dogs and people through training. She teaches group classes and private lessons in basic and advanced obedience, competition dog training, puppy training, Schutzhund training, personal protection, Canine Good Citizenship, and therapy dog training.

Beth also trains and places service dogs for children with autism and custom trains "cross-trained" companion/protection dogs for families and individuals. She consults for shelters in the tri-state area and for New Jersey law enforcement on cases involving canine behavior and temperament.

Beth began studying animal behavior and dog training at age twelve. She has worked and studied under many renowned animal behaviorists and trainers. After graduating from Rutgers University with a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology and Criminal Justice, Beth worked as a New Jersey State Animal Control Officer. In 1989, she founded her own company and has made dog training and consulting her full-time career since 1995. Competing with her dogs, Beth has earned national and international titles, championships, and honors in both Schutzhund and AKC Obedience. In 2003 and 2009, she represented the United States in the FCI World Trials. In 2015, Beth and her dog Fyte qualified for the elite team representing the United States at the WUSV in Finland, making Fyte the youngest qualifying dog in the history of this worldwide competition. Beth also took the Vice-championship with Fyte at the 2015 US Schutzhund Clubs of American National Championships.

Beth is the author of *Real World Dog Training*, and has produced a number of training DVDs and videos. In addition, Beth trains and handles dogs for movies, television, and theater, with recent credits including appearances at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, and in *Board Walk Empire*, the *Batman* franchise, *Damages*, *Blue Bloods*, *The Good Wife*, *The Blacklist*, *Billions*, and *Gotham*.

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