

Battersea Dogs & Cats Home

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Factsheet

Life skills for dogs



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Modern day living asks a lot of our pet dogs. Owners want them to be friendly to everyone they meet; people, dogs, cats... of varying shapes, sizes, ages and personalities. We expect them to be unfazed by the world around them and all that it contains. However, as dogs get older they become more fearful of the things they haven't encountered in the past. Although it is impossible to expose dogs to everything they are going to meet in life, the more experiences they have, the more confident they will be. Unfortunately, dogs that are not adequately socialised from a young age are at risk of developing fears and phobias.

How to socialise your puppy

In order for your puppy to develop into a sociable and well-adjusted dog, it is essential that you embark on a suitable programme of socialisation. After 14 weeks of age, a dog is much more likely to behave fearfully towards new experiences and as a result life becomes a lot more difficult. In an ideal world, puppies would be exposed to everything they are likely to encounter in later life by the time they are 14 weeks old. However, this is quite a task – especially as puppies should not normally be taken out until they are fully vaccinated (which might not be until they are 12 weeks old). It is therefore advisable to consult your vet about alternative methods of socialisation up to this point. For example, you may be able to expose your puppy to the outside world by carrying him around in your arms or in a cat-carrier in areas where there is a low risk of infection. By doing this you are allowing your puppy to experience sounds, people, smells, vehicles and movement.

Once the vaccines are complete and your vet gives you the all clear, it is vital to get your puppy on the ground outside.

Even between the ages of six to eight months, puppies are sensitive to objects, people and sounds they have not encountered since early puppy-hood and may respond to these with fear. In order to maintain their confidence, socialisation needs to continue beyond this age.



Puppy socialisation classes

Puppy socialisation classes are a great opportunity for your puppy to meet other dogs and people, and will give you the necessary support to raise a well-adjusted dog. However, it is very important that you choose your puppy class carefully; a bad puppy class can be detrimental to your puppy's development. If possible, attend the class without your puppy the first time to make sure you are happy with it. Always ensure that the methods used are suited to you and your puppy and always express any concerns that you may have.

What about older dogs?

Socialisation is a lifelong process and you should encourage your dog to respond to unthreatening stimuli in a relaxed way throughout his life, by praising and rewarding his desirable reactions.

When socialising your older dog with new stimuli it is important to remember that, as with young puppies, all experiences need to be positive, controlled, and at a level your dog can cope with. Start on a small scale: e.g. for coping with traffic noises, walk along country roads and then build up to busier towns.

If you have rehomed an older dog, socialising him may be complicated by his prior learning and experiences. If your dog is displaying unwanted reactions in social situations, it is recommended that you seek professional help to assist you in developing a programme appropriate to your dog's needs.

For advice on your dog's individual socialising needs, call our Behaviour Advice Line on **0905 020 0222** (calls cost 25p per minute).

