

Canine social skills – how to help your new dog or puppy make friends

by Teresa Hanula

When Kimberly adopted her young husky cross, Chimo, from the local shelter, he seemed gentle and friendly – until he came face to face with the sheltie living next door. “We were inches away from having a fight on our hands,” says Kimberly. “I later found out that Chimo had very little direct contact with other dogs while growing up, and that I was going to have to teach him how to socialize with others of his kind.”

Socialization problems are very common in dogs of all ages. It doesn't matter whether you're adopting a baby puppy or an adult dog, you'll probably have to do at least some training to help him get along harmoniously with the other dogs and people in your life. Depending on his background, even an older dog does not always arrive with years of training or socialization under his belt. Chances are, he'll need some extra time and attention to turn him into the perfect companion.

Baby steps

Puppies that have not been properly socialized before 16 weeks of age, which is a critical period, can develop fears of anything not previously encountered, as well as anything they have had negative experiences with. These fears can present themselves in different ways. One dog may shy away from a fearful stimulus while another may feel the need to protect himself. On the other hand, dogs that have been exposed numerous times to people or other dogs may become extremely exuberant and rowdy in their greetings.

If you're adopting a young puppy, one of the best ways to start socializing him is to host a puppy party. Invite your friends and family to bring their own pooches to your house to meet the newcomer. Here's how to ensure the party remains both safe and successful:

- Ensure all the dogs, including your own puppy, are in good health.
- Hold the party in a fenced-in area with a secure entrance, so there is no chance of a dog escaping.
- Have specific people designated as monitors to watch for early signs of dog fights – it's easy for a dog's guardian to get distracted and not see an aggressive situation brewing.
- Try to separate large and small dogs. As gentle and friendly as that big Lab is, it might not prevent him from inadvertently stepping on and injuring a smaller dog.
- Have extra crates available to serve as time-out areas for tired or over-stimulated dogs.
- Don't throw a lot of treats into a group of dogs or puppies. Fighting over food is an extremely common behavior among dogs.

What about adults?

Socializing a grown dog may present a few more challenges, but with hard work and dedication it can be done. Before adopting, research a breed that will fit into your

lifestyle and match your energy level. Before you even bring the dog home, decide on a plan of action to follow with the dog, and stick to it. Be sure that family members and friends are all on the same page. Consistency is the key to success.

- Realize that love is not always enough. If you encounter specific behavior problems that you can't solve, a qualified positive trainer can help with private training sessions, group classes or a combination of both. Also, a foundation of basic obedience will give your dog more security. When a stressful situation arises, you can always ask the dog to follow a command; he no longer worries how he is expected to act, only how to follow your instructions.
- Some problems may take a long time to fix. Breaking a seemingly complex problem into small steps will help, and will give both you and your dog the confidence to continue pushing forward.
- Read and become knowledgeable about basic principles of *classical conditioning* and *desensitization*.
- Become familiar with your dog's body language. It can be very subtle, but with practice you can improve your skills at reading it. We often misinterpret a dog's body signals. For example, a wagging tail is commonly regarded as a friendly gesture, but it can also mean apprehension or nervousness.

The social scene

Make a list of appropriate socialization places. The more practice your dog receives in positive situations, the more confidence he will gain for handling unfamiliar ones. Try not to take him places that will be too much for him to handle, where he might become stressed due to noise or rowdiness, or where you can't give him enough attention or remove him quickly enough from a stressful situation. For example, if your dog is afraid of other canines, introduce him first to friendly, calm dogs that you know well, using one-on-one situations and lots of treats. Continue in this fashion until your dog shows he can handle more excitable dogs, or multi-dog situations.

Safe, appropriate socialization places include the veterinary clinic, a dog friendly pet store, or a friend's house. Dog friendly parks or beaches are especially great places to socialize your dog, but keep in mind that they are not always a safe bet. They can be lots of fun, but also stressful for some dogs.

- ❖ Scan the park before you enter. Make sure a group of dogs is not congregated at the entrance.
- ❖ Remove your dog if he appears afraid or overwhelmed or is going too crazy.
- ❖ Watch what your dog is doing and pay attention to his play style. If he becomes too crazy and excited, tell him to sit for a moment. Heated play can quickly turn into a fight.
- ❖ Get involved if the situation calls for help. Dogs should not always be allowed to work out their own problems. Don't let your dog be bullied by others.
- ❖ Try to coordinate play dates with people and dogs he's comfortable with. A special friend for your dog can often greatly improve his social skills.

- ❖ Don't stand in the same location. Walk around and encourage your dog to pay attention to your whereabouts.
- ❖ Don't let other people tell you what's best. Become familiar with your own dog's responses and movements.
- ❖ Don't bring your own dog's toys to the park. Resource guarding can often arise in a group situation.

Socializing a dog can be difficult, but with time his behavior will change. Even the most fearful or anxious dogs will improve if they are given the proper resources and experiences. Set realistic expectations and put your dog in situations where he is likely to succeed. "It took a lot of patience and persistence, as well as some help from a professional trainer," says Kimberly, "but now Chimo gets along quite happily with other dogs, including the sheltie next door!"

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