**What is “Early Socialization” and Why is it so Important for Puppies?**

Many of our clients ask, “Why does my dog need to do playgroup or interact with other dogs and puppies so early on in puppyhood?” – and that’s a great question! We could write a whole book about this subject, but here is the condensed version!

1. While it’s great that your puppy may have a buddy at home, she will not be able to learn all of the social and play skills that they need from only that one (or two) other dogs you have at home. Think about toddlers and little kids; do they learn to share, and be kind, and play well with others, and everything else they need, only from their other sibling at home? No way! We as humans need a ton of other-human interactions to learn our social skills, and puppies are the same way. Because all dogs do not react the same way to your puppy, they need to learn play skills, bite inhibition, and overall social manners from MANY other dogs. As in, we recommend puppies meet and play with at least **50 new dogs** by the age of four months. This is a huge number of dogs by a very early age, but this is when it matters; this is during a canine’s “crucial exposure period” which is only from the age of six to sixteen weeks of age, then that window closes. Essentially, whatever a puppy experiences (positively or negatively) in this window, will HIGHLY affect them in later life. This is why you can’t “socialize” an adult dog who hasn’t been around enough dogs early in life; we can teach calmness and better manners to the adult dog, but true socialization occurs only at this young age. Ian Dunbar (a hugely popular veterinarian and animal behaviorist who also founded the Association of Pet Dog Trainers) also recommends that puppies meet and interact with **100 people** in this time frame as well.
2. Another situation we hear a lot of is that the puppy may or may not have a friend at home, but also meets new dogs on walks or out in the world. While this is fine (as long as the meetings are going well), a five-second interaction with another dog on-leash is not going to teach your puppy hardly anything as far as actual normal, off-leash, play skills go. The same goes for their puppy class, which is great of course, but in addition to the fact that it involves somewhat limited interactions between the dogs, it’s only the same eight or nine other puppies.
3. We are certainly well aware of the awful timing of this crucial socialization window in relation to the age of when puppies get their shots (distemper/parvo shots, then rabies shot later). We certainly want all puppies to be safe in all aspects of their lives; however, the fact of the matter is that this socialization window does end after the first four months of a puppy’s life, and we cannot get it back. One local vet clinic we recommend often even has a “puppy preschool” of their own where clients with young puppies can play and socialize, because modern vets are becoming more and more aware of the highly important need for this early socialization. If your veterinarian recommends not taking the dog anywhere until they are “fully vaccinated,” we recommend you research other opinions as well as look for safe ways for your dog to get out in the world a bit while the puppy is still in the crucial exposure period. This short and early developmental period can be compared to a child’s first seven or so years of life; if he or she is kept home that entire time, he or she simply cannot be expected to then suddenly know how to behave out in the world or get along with other children, as all of this is learned at a very young age. If this window is missed, regarding interactions with people, other dogs, and general experiences out in the world, we can only do our best to modify the dog’s behavior later on; we can’t “fix” under-socialization. As our rule of thumb, we typically recommend using the following guidelines concerning shots:

**After one set**: Keep the puppy home and don’t go anywhere just yet. Hold the puppy at all vet appointments and avoid ground contact there and in general except at home. If a puppy is going to contract a disease, it will most likely come from the ground; including and especially the ground around your neighborhood and anywhere else other dogs might have been.

**After two sets**: Take the puppy only to expectedly-safe places; Arie’s Dogland for playgroup and class, friends’ and families’ homes who have vaccinated and healthy dogs (or no dogs), and bring friendly, vaccinated dogs over to your house. Still hold the puppy at vet appointments (remember - that’s where all the sick dogs go every single day!). We also highly recommend you start taking the puppy places out in the world, but CARRY them. For example, you can hold her and walk around UNM, uptown, growers’ markets, etc. – just don’t put the puppy down or have them interact with other unknown dogs. You can also take the puppy to dog-friendly stores (check our website’s resources page for ideas), and bring a blanket to put in the shopping cart to put the puppy in as long as you can make sure he or she can’t won’t jump out. We also recommend taking the puppy in the car and parking somewhere close to lots of “busy” spots (such as out front of a Costco on a weekend if the pavement and weather is cool enough), and sitting in the car with them to let them watch everything happening. We do NOT recommend neighborhood walks until a week or so after the third set of shots, for the same disease-contraction reason mentioned above. Many people think they are keeping their puppy safe by keeping him or her away from other dogs, but they are going for daily walks in their neighborhood or on trails; this is the most risky situation for puppies to be put in, because as we already mentioned, diseases are most likely going to come from the ground where other infected dogs have been.

**After three sets**: A week or so after three sets of shots, we consider puppies “good to go,” and they can now be taken to more places and be put down to walk around; such as all the places mentioned above, in addition to hardware stores, and other busy places. Just be sure to keep all interactions with other dogs, people, and the world in general very positive! If a puppy has a bad experience with other dogs in this crucial exposure period (6-16 weeks), it will likely highly negatively affect the puppy’s social development. Even having another dog, including another dog at home, snap at your new puppy or freak him or her out, can cause residual behavior effects of the dog around new dogs later in life.

**About four sets**: It is obviously up to you and your veterinarian on how many sets you’d like to have done to your puppy. Typically though, veterinarians recommend four sets of shots because they don’t trust that the first set of shots was given correctly or at the right age by the breeders or whoever gave the first set of shots, so they start over and don’t count the first set that was given. This fourth set will therefor vary from dog to dog depending on your veterinarian.

1. For most people who work, we do realize that it can be tough to get in the short “intro” that we require. However, we can always work with you if you have a schedule that makes our regular intro hours tough to make! We can sometimes do a short intro on a weekday evening for example, as long as you make arrangements with us. Also, we recommend the puppy only stay for an hour or so for their next visit to help ease them into feeling comfortable with the group, but if this also doesn’t work with your schedule, let us know! With some puppies we can get away with you leaving them longer (such as a half day of four hours, or a full day), if the puppy looks comfortable during the intro.
2. It’s now or never! We often see clients who, for example, bring the puppy for classes (which is great!), but then wait until the class is entirely over to try playgroup. Bad news folks… for most puppies by this time, it’s way too late! The puppies are usually only six months or older, but we see many different issues at this point. Most haven’t been socialized well enough early on (hence this whole article!) and are too reactive or even aggressive to do playgroup at all. Others are way too fearful and don’t even want to get near the other dogs. Some are simply just too big/old; our Central Park/big dog yard is full to newcomers, unless the puppies start in Tiny Town/Puppyville then go into Central Park as they grow up and are ready. However, puppies need to start in the smaller yards where they learn the social skills and bite inhibition, as well as potty training and overall manners. We are not the type of facility to use just “as needed” later on in the dog’s life; we coach the dogs to fit into the group of their friends, which is mostly a consistent group of dogs, and we ensure that the dogs are not stressed being here for playgroup. So the bottom line is… use the playgroup now, early, and often! If you’re looking for a social, well-mannered friend, this is most of how to get it!

**The following further emphasize how important early socialization is:**

“The primary and most important time for puppy socialization is the first three months of life… For this reason, the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior believes that it should be the standard of care for puppies to receive such socialization before they are fully vaccinated. While puppies’ immune systems are still developing during these early months, appropriate care makes the risk of infection relatively small compared to the chance of death [likely from euthanasia] from a behavior problem.”

*-* ***The American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior***

# From the American Veterinary Medical Association:

# Behavior society supports early puppy socialization

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| ***Posted Sept. 15, 2008*** |
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| A position statement on early socialization in puppies released in July by the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior encourages veterinarians to recommend puppies be socialized before the vaccine series is complete.  The guidelines state puppies can start socialization classes as early as 7 to 8 weeks of age. In general, they should receive a minimum of one set of vaccines at least seven days prior to the first class as well as a first deworming.  Additionally, puppies should show no signs of illness during the classes and should be kept up-to-date on vaccines throughout the class.  While veterinarians are appropriately concerned about infectious disease in young puppies, the fact is that behavioral issues—not infectious diseases—are the number one cause of death for dogs under 3 years of age, according to the AVSAB. Veterinarians contribute to these behavioral issues when recommending pets be kept away from possible germs until their vaccine series is complete, the AVSAB stated.  "Puppies go through a sensitive period of socialization when they are uniquely prepared to benefit from exposure to social opportunities. From the time the owner adopts the puppy until 3 to 4 months of age, it is critical that the owner get the puppy out to meet other animals and people, and experience many different kinds of environments," said AVSAB president, Dr. E. Kathryn Meyer.  "These (unsocialized) puppies may also fail to develop coping mechanisms and grow up into dogs that are unable to adapt to new situations. This can severely inhibit the dog's quality of life as well as the owner's enjoyment of the pet," Dr. Meyer added.  To veterinarians who refrain from recommending early socialization because of the threat of infectious disease, Dr. Meyer suggested taking control of the situation.  "Have the puppy classes in your lobby where you know you can disinfect and you know who has entered," Dr. Meyer said. Doing so will greatly enhance the veterinarian-client-patient relationship. The pet is happier, and when the owners see this, they are more compliant, she explained.  To view a copy of the AVSAB puppy position statement, go to [www.AVSABonline.org](http://www.avsabonline.org/) |

For another great resource on puppy shots versus socialization, plus a ton of other health, training, food, and general info, we highly recommend the subscription journal called The Whole Dog Journal. This is an online journal as well as a monthly mailed journal, which is very much worth the $25 or so per year. [www.Whole-Dog-Journal.com](http://www.Whole-Dog-Journal.com). Also, we highly recommend the website/dvd set of [www.PuppyCulture.com](http://www.PuppyCulture.com), which emphasizes the socialization window of puppies before the age of 12 weeks. If you have any questions at all regarding your puppy’s socialization, don’t hesitate to email or call us and we’d be happy to help! We see too many dogs with behavior issues because they were never properly socialized as puppies, so help us try to prevent that problem with your puppy so you can have the best little canine companion possible!

***Now get out there and start socializing that puppy!***

Note: Arie’s Dogland cannot be held responsible for anything that happens to or with dogs and puppies outside of Arie’s Dogland, and can only make recommendations for safe-as-possible socialization to help puppy owners have the most well-rounded and social canine companion as possible. If you have any questions at all regarding your dog’s safety, socialization, or anything else, please contact us and/or your veterinarian.