

My Pet Has Issues!

I'm planning on adopting a puppy, and heard that it's important to "socialize" a dog. What does this mean?

A puppy can be an exciting and fulfilling addition to your family, and socialization is an important part of raising a confident, friendly, and happy pet. While any new dog should be socialized, puppyhood is the most important time to expose your dog to the world.

In the first six months of life, puppies pass through a series of "sensitive periods", or times during which they are most able to learn important life lessons. Research shows that if puppies don't learn critical skills during these times, the process of learning them will be slower and more difficult. The period from 4 to 16 weeks of age is one such sensitive period, called the social period. It is the time when your puppy learns how to interact appropriately with humans and other dogs. Naturally, the pup's mother teaches him some of these skills, but when the pup leaves his mother and moves into your home, it is your responsibility to continue the learning.

The best "puppy teachers" are other dogs. Through them, your puppy will learn *bite inhibition*, or how to playfully nip without hurting, as well as good play behavior. It is healthy for dogs to play, periodically correct one another with a small yelp or quick growl, and learn to adapt to other dogs. Your job is to give your dog the opportunity to meet and play with other dogs in a safe environment where you can observe and intervene if your pup becomes anxious or overwhelmed. Many dog owners get nervous and try to prevent vigorous play; this is a mistake, as it will teach your pup that playing with other dogs is bad or scary. Instead, encourage play, and interrupt only if one of the dogs signals discomfort and the others do not respond by being gentle. Consider a training class or play group designed specifically for puppies, where your little one can play and learn from others his age.

You can also teach your dog important lessons. For example, when he becomes too rambunctious during play, end the game by turning away and ignoring the pup for a moment. Some folks prefer to close the dog in another room, but it's much easier to simply walk away, as the pup will learn that if he can calm down in your presence, you will play with him again. If he nips at you during play, make a loud "OUCH" noise, much as another puppy would. You'll be surprised at how quickly your dog stops what he's doing and looks at you, at which point you can praise him for listening to you.

Learn more about Amy Wallis on her website: www.mypethasissues.com. If there is an issue you would like to see addressed in this column, contact her at amy@mypethasissues.com.