

PUPPY SOCIALIZATION: *What is it and Why is it so Important?*

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As a dog trainer, one of the saddest things I have seen is a new puppy owner who does not understand or appreciate the importance of socializing puppy to other humans and to other dogs.

Recently, I was called to consult with an owner, Jack (not his real name), whose 5-month-old German Shepherd, Popeye (not his real name), had become fearful and skittish around anyone other than Jack, Jack's wife and the other dog in the household. What prompted the call to me was that Popeye had just bitten, without provocation, an adult relative of Jack's who was visiting for the day.

Before obtaining Popeye, Jack had done all the right things to ensure that he was getting a dog that was temperamentally and physically healthy:

- Jack contacted a reputable breeder.
- When Popeye was 4 weeks old, Jack visited him at the breeder's so that he could make sure to observe appropriate behavior between Popeye and the dam (his mother), between Popeye and his littermates, and between Popeye and himself. This puppy was a happy, laid-back boy that was learning to interact well with everyone – dogs and humans alike.
- Jack waited until Popeye was 2 months old (and properly weaned from his mom) before taking him home.

So, why did this perfectly fine dog turn into a neurotic mess?

Jack, who worked from home, had become swamped with the responsibilities of running his business. For the first 3 months of Popeye's new home life, Jack said he hadn't had the time to walk the pup past the block he lived on, where they rarely met up with other people or other dogs. He never took Popeye with him in the car when he ran errands. Over this 3-month period, other humans had rarely visited the home and no other dogs had visited with their owners. Without realizing it, Jack was setting up Popeye for failure.

During early development, the first 12 to 16 weeks of life are critical to preparing a pup to be secure and confident in the world. You would think that dogs know, instinctively, how to behave around other dogs. But they don't. They learn, for the first 8 weeks or so, by interaction with their mom and littermates. But that isn't the end of the learning process. It's just the beginning. Puppies must then be introduced to as many other dogs as possible -- healthy, well-socialized dogs, that is! Pups learn to "communicate" by learning to read other dogs' body language and by learning to display appropriate body language of their own. Without these skills, a puppy is at a terrible loss.

The same goes for puppies and humans. Pups must be introduced safely to as many people as possible – old, young, tall, short, fat, skinny, white people, people of color, people with hats, with sunglasses, with umbrellas, etc., etc., etc. Puppies also need to be exposed safely to new sounds and smells and sights early on so that they learn to take them all in stride.

Imagine isolating a healthy newborn human infant in the house for several months before allowing him any new sensory experiences. What are the chances that he'll readily accept new people, new sights or new sounds? Would you assume that the sound of a car backfiring or the sight of several 6-foot, 300-pound men walking by might freak him out? You would assume correctly!

Raising a puppy is a big responsibility. It's not for everyone. There's no shame in that. But if you decide to get a puppy, please learn as much as you can ahead of time so that you can do the best job of preparing that pup to be a happy, well-adjusted member of the family. If you would like help or further information, please contact The Well-Heeled Dog at 310-248-2420 or at susanisaacs@mac.com.

