

How to build puppy confidence

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Though much has been written about how to get puppies used to people, places and things during the weeks before they are 5-6 months old, I want to focus on some particular concerns we see in our clinical practice as regards socialization. These concerns existed before the current pandemic, and are as appropriate to contemplate now, as they are at any other time.

The adolescent puppies and grown-up dogs we see in our clinical appointments share some commonalities that we suspect are related to under-socialization. I say “suspect” because we do not always know the dog’s background, as our patients are bred (on-purpose and not, rescue or not) and imported from all over the world. But here are the symptoms we hear about the most with these dogs from the owners:

1. **They are chronically afraid of noises;** dropped pans in the kitchen, buses, bouncing big trucks, cars hitting potholes;
2. **They are “neophobic.”** This means if your neighbor puts a television out on the curb, your dog will not go near it, and may bark at it; they are afraid of new hats on known friends; they slink through their walks, trying to go back the way they came.

In every appointment we have a machine set up on the floor called the “Treat and Train.” Invented by veterinarian Sophia Yin, it is a remote treat-dispensing machine. From a distance of four feet away, I can press a button, the motor whirs, and food comes out. We use the machine because it is a great training tool, to be sure, but it also shows us how frightened our patient is of a novel sound/stimulus, even one that most of them immediately notice has food in it. Some dogs jump back and, occasionally, spend the rest of the appointment as far away from the machine as they can get, shivering in a corner of the room. Others barely notice the noise- “Look, food!” All the others fall somewhere in between. What we are looking for is the recovery time. Does the dog approach the machine again, ever? Sneak up on it? Start eating the food from it? Respond to reinforcement delivered from it? Dogs with a long recovery time have the most difficulty making their way through the noisy, scary world.

In both our Puppy Play n’ Learn (PPNL) classes and in Clinic, it is troubling to see the increases in fear we have experienced in the last two years. In fact, we recently changed our puppy class in order to try and help the fearful puppies that have traveled to the city from all over the world, and whose previous experiences did not expose them to anything in the environment with which they are now faced. I think your puppy could benefit from our experience, so here is what I recommend for your less-than-six-month-old puppy these days, and always:

1. **Watch for fearful behaviors:** ears back, tail tucked, paw lifted, attempts to get away from something.
2. **Any time you see the puppy get scared of something in the environment,** like the wind, a loud truck, a person reaching over them, or a loud child, say “*What’s that?!*” in a high, happy tone, give the puppy treats until the scary thing is gone or while you move the puppy away to a

less-scary place. Try to expose them to noisy things at a distance at which they will alert, but not get scared. You can practice dropping things far away from them (“What’s that?”); start with things that quietly go “Thud,” and over time and with the puppy’s continued calm reaction, work up to a “Clang!” In class, we roll big garbage cans and strollers around. “What’s THAT?” Bang two metal pans together, softly at first. “WHATS THAT?!” Clients report this exercise, repeated in their homes and neighborhoods, is helpful in building their pup’s confidence.

3. **If the puppy will not eat**, that tells you they are super-scared and should be quickly moved to a distance at which they will eat.
4. **If you are indoors and don’t have a treat on you**, still say “What’s that?” and go to the kitchen with the puppy to get them a treat. If you are outside and the puppy wants to escape the area, say “What’s that?” feed them if they will eat, and move immediately away from the scary stuff.
5. **If your puppy gets scared while on a walk, and wants to turn around and go in another direction, let them.** Escape from scary things is very reinforcing, and you may build future walking in new directions, as long as they can escape as needed. Don’t try and bribe them to go farther. This is not because you are “rewarding fear” (which is not possible - fear is a reflex, not a behavior trained with rewards). Look at it this way: if you are afraid of snakes, imagine you are standing at the snake exhibit at the zoo *looking at terrifying snakes*. If your friend is reassuring you there is nothing to be afraid of, you know that is not true, because your heart is racing and your respiration rate is through the roof. What is the only thing that makes you feel better about snakes in that situation? Escaping the snakes.
6. **Finally, don’t throw your pup into unpredictable situations with people or other dogs.** If you see fearful behavior from your pup, say “Gotta go!” and get them out of there. Do not let people randomly thump your pup on the head. Do not let other dogs jump on them and scare them. Here are two good YouTube videos about dog body language:

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=00_9JPltXHI
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mSRQ9o22KG8&t=4s>

Watch the first video until you start recognizing these behaviors from your puppy. Then, watch the second, where the small brown dog is completely loose-bodied and even its mouth is relaxed. Then, if you come upon another dog that looks more like the husky and less like the brown dog, cross the street and stay away. Only let your puppy meet relaxed, friendly dogs, one at a time.

Additionally, stay out of dog parks. We call them “Crime School.” Your puppy could be set upon by dogs that scare it, and that could have long-lasting effects.

Finally, know that no matter how well you do – or don’t - socialize your puppy, recognize that their behavior could change as they age and as environmental and inherited effects manifest themselves. At the end of the day, your best bet is to gently teach your puppy that the world is a place where cookies come to you when you are scared, and that as you grow, you can earn those cookies by doing what your owner wants you to do.

Related reading:

- Building a Confident Puppy: org/angell_services/building-a-confident-puppy
- So You Have a New Puppy, What Now? org/pet_resources/so-you-have-a-new-puppy-what-now/
- What to Expect in Puppy’s First Year: org/angell_services/what-to-expect-your-puppys-first-year/