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Puppies have amazing resilience when it comes to exploring the world. They learn what is safe and unsafe largely through trial and error. I once had a puppy that licked a propane tank at minus 30 only to discover his tongue stuck to the metal. As he panicked, I ran to get some warm water to help him unstuck himself. When I returned he was happily running around while a tiny strip of his tongue remained on the propane tank. He never licked that tank again...but the experience did not minimize his curiosity about other things. Luckily most of them turned out to be pleasant experiences. He learned that with the exception of propane tanks, the world of humans and their things was fabulous. Friends thought this experience was 'good for him' and perhaps it was, but too many of these panic stricken moments would most likely have been harmful. We hear very mixed opinions about what young puppies need to learn but science provides some concrete ideas that can help raise confident pleasant dogs.

The development of puppies is classed into stages. The Socialization Period from week three through 12 is of critical importance. During this time the dog learns how to react to people and particularly to strangers. In large part they are determining the level of fearfulness or confidence they will display towards people as an adult dog.

If a dog is to be comfortable when she is older, expose her to "new situations that turn out well" before she is 12 weeks of age. Choosing a breeder who is concerned about socialization is important as they are primarily responsible for the puppy's first 8 weeks. Good breeding is also important because genetics plays a role in a dog's ability to feel confident and friendly. Choosing confident parents should top a breeder's criteria. A bitch with anxious tendencies transfers this to the pups genetically. Anxiety also has an effect in-utero and through first experiences with the mom! That means a lot of extra work socializing puppy - and she may never be as confident as dogs born to parents with great temperaments.

The minute puppy arrives home control new situations so they remain pleasant for the dog. If a puppy is left unsupervised with children she may learn the world is unpredictable and scary. Imagine a child's play scene where the neighbours' Tomcat plays the role of the Lone Ranger and a 9-week-old puppy plays the role of his noble steed; it could go bad.

Good socialization is exposure to as many people, sounds and situations where the dog is not forced to do things he feels scared about. Meeting new people should be something that the puppy finds absolutely pleasant. If that means equating new people with yummy treats so be it. Making sure puppy meets people of different statures, colors, ages, hairstyles, smells, gaits, and carrying and wearing as many different items as possible will help the dog realize that people are good and that there is no need for fear, anxiety or aggression.



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Puppies must also engage in a lot of safe and consensual play with other puppies and perhaps a few adult dogs that are very puppy friendly. Having puppy bullied is not good socialization. Some self-appointed dog aficionados at the park may try announce that your dog needs to be put in his place by other dogs so he doesn't turn out dominant. This is simply ridiculous! If pups are rolled or put down repeatedly they learn that dogs are scary and begin to experience fear when other dogs approach. Unfortunately this can lead to aggressive behaviour in the future. Supervised puppy classes from a certified dog trainer are the best places to get safe, consensual play.

Bite control is another critical piece of socialization. Puppies learn to control the level to which they bite down through interacting with other puppies and through mouthing their human counterparts. Ian Dunbar a prominent vet and author on dog and puppy behaviour suggests that bite control is the single most important thing a dog must learn. Dogs must learn to be gentle with their own kind and with us humans as well. Dunbar says a soft mouth must be in place by about four and a half to five months of age.

I remember watching a friend of mine playing roughly with her puppy. When he bit her too hard she picked him up and bit him back. The puppy and I were shocked and my friend thought the puppy 'had it coming'. This in fact can escalate the behaviour or in the worst case make the dog afraid of its owner. A great way to let a dog know that biting hard is not okay is to initially allow a bit of mouthing that is soft when the dog is calm. When the biting is harder say 'ouch' in a puppy yelp tone. This lets the dog know that they bit too hard. If they still insist on biting hard get up and leave the puppy alone. Send a very clear message that says "no one will play if you bite that hard".

A good puppy class goes a long way in helping with bite control and having young dogs learn that other puppies and people are good things. Earlier is better. Most training schools will not (Nor should they) allow dogs older than 6 months into puppy classes. Make sure that mouthing is covered in the curriculum and that puppy play is allowed. Ideally training behaviours such as sit and come when called will also be covered! Outside of puppy class make sure that most experiences are positive. Barking at the vacuum the first few times is normal... but if the dog jumps at the sound of the coffee grinder and every other thump or bang, bring her to a professional trainer sooner rather than later – even if the dog is over 12 weeks there are things that can help!