



## Paw Prints

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Columnist

### The importance of socializing your dog

You recently adopted an adorable one-year-old dog from a shelter and found out that he has behavioral problems. You've worked hard to train your new furry friend by yourself, but now have to call in a professional trainer.

Rescuing a dog from an unknown background that could have been filled with neglect and abuse is filled with challenges. Often dogs surrendered to a shelter are in shock and are fearful. It could take months of hard work just to get him comfortable around you and his new home, especially if he wasn't properly socialized to begin with.

A puppy that has been socialized at an early age can avoid behavior problems.

This increases the likelihood that a dog will become a wonderful pet. A puppy, just like a child, can't grow into a healthy adult without your guidance and proper training.

Like humans, dogs are social creatures and your puppy needs interaction — with you, other people and other animals — beginning very early in life.

According to the ASPCA, a puppy is most accepting of new experiences between three and 12 weeks old. After that age, he will become much more cautious of anything he hasn't yet encountered. From about 12 to 18 weeks old the opportunity to easily socialize a puppy ends — and with each passing week it becomes harder to get the puppy to accept and enjoy something that he's initially wary of.

Your puppy needs to be exposed to people, animals, places, sounds and experiences that you expect him to be comfortable with in later life. Depending on the lifestyle you have planned for your furry friend, this might include the sight and sound of trains, garbage trucks, schoolyards of screaming children, crowds, cats or crying infants.

Proper socialization will help train your young dog to handle new experiences and challenges with acceptable,

appropriate behavior.

An unsocialized dog is unlikely to cope well with changes in his environment or situation, making him difficult to handle for his pet parent, groomer, pet-sitter, and any people that come to visit.

What if you didn't have your furry friend as a puppy to properly socialize?

Regardless of the reason your dog wasn't socialized as a puppy, it doesn't mean he has to be kept confined to a life without dog friends or free play with others.

Here are a few tips on how to socialize your adult dog:

Dog walks (don't forget his leash) are a great opportunity for your furry friend to see and possibly meet other dogs and people, as well as practice proper behavior when out and about. The goal should be to teach your adopted dog to behave calmly in public and on walks. Bring lots of tasty treats on your walks and reward Fido for sitting quietly and responding to his name while other dogs pass by at a safe distance.

Introducing dogs on a leash can be tricky, so keep introductions short. If he should bark at another dog, simply get his attention, using the treats, and walk him away from the situation. Once he calms down,



PHOTO BY JODI SCHNEIDER MCNAMEE

Honey was socialized as a puppy and is a great pet.

continue your walk.

Don't rush things, but if you can introduce your dog to one new activity a week, it will go a long way toward helping them socialize and remain calm and well-behaved. Think of it this way; Fido will be acting as an observer at first.

For example, instead of just taking your unsocialized dog into a dog park and hoping for the best, you can expose them slowly by walking them around the outside of the fence and letting them see the dogs play and have fun. If your heart is set on social time with other dogs, start by introducing your furry friend to one dog at a time.

Invite a friend that has a gentle, easy-going dog to go on a walk with you and Fido. Allow polite distance

between dogs while they get accustomed to each other. If both dogs appear relaxed throughout the walk, allow them to sniff each other briefly. Keep leashes loose and each interaction short. If either dog appears to be tensing up, call them apart using a pleasant voice.

If both dogs' bodies appear loose and tails are wagging, it's time to consider an off-leash session in one of your fenced yards with leashes dragging, using the same short sessions.

Teaching your adult dog appropriate behavior and protecting him from unwanted contact will go a long way in building a trusting relationship.

Give Fido space, time, and positive reinforcement when he behaves in a way that is pleasing to you.

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