



We need to stop calling it “socialization”

by Amy Cook | Feb 2, 2019 | Blog | 30 comments

You got a new puppy and you want to do everything right. You read all the books, and you’ve heard of course that you have to “socialize” your pup, so you take him everywhere, and have him meet everyone, getting treats and affection from all. You do this because you really don’t want him to be scared of any of this, and you think that having positive interactions means they won’t be, as only good things happen.

It’s not an illogical assumption, but it’s far from the best way to accomplish that, and it has downsides we are not giving enough air time to.

It’s also the wrong term for what your task really is.

The main behavioral responsibility we have in raising puppies and in helping any new dog to be a welcome member of society is to teach them how to not be attracted to strange dogs and strange people. To walk in our world successfully means to ignore the passers-by, both human and canine, greeting only those that are known to us or who make it necessary to get politely past. Yet strangely, we call this “socialization.”

There is nothing social about getting a dog used to the world he lives in. Social time is a separate thing, and social skills are learned in very specific ways with trusted partners. Socializing is something people do at parties, where they are expected to talk with others. Socializing is not what you do when you are teaching your dog how to move through the world politely and without fear.

Yet we let everyone coo over our puppies, or we coo over everyone else’s. We make them the center of attention any time they’re around, and we even will go out of our way to try to interact with dogs we see, asking to give them treats, making ourselves very magnetic. Why? To entertain ourselves? Because we like dogs and want a “dog moment” today? Well, it’s at the expense of the good behavior of that dog, and we need to get realistic about this.

In many other countries, dogs are just like everyone else walking by you. They aren’t cause for stopping and asking about, making eye contact with, and offering to feed and pet. They are just like other people’s children; none of our business, and certainly not ours to take social liberties with.

Dog lovers: do not seek to interrupt every dog you see, trying to have a social moment, making yourself important and relevant to a dog you don’t know well. Admire from afar, make a comment to the owner if they seem open to it, but ignore the dog. Going on your way is the best way have to teach that dog how to



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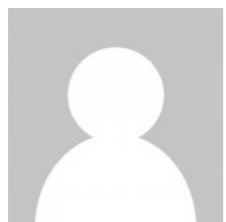
[Dear Marzipan](#)

be friendly in this world. Paradoxical, but true.

Dog owners: do not seek to teach your dog that other people are a source of entertainment, affection, or food for them. Teach them that you are the source of such things, and especially so if they can withstand their initial social urges toward strangers.

Then, give them social time with trusted friends in social settings, so that they develop and express those skills in the right manner, supported by you. Don't let strangers train your dog to be hyper-social in the name of "socialization." Instead, civilize your pup, teaching her to be a good citizen. Let her habituate to her world, going from finding everything overwhelmingly interesting, to knowing that strangers are for leaving alone politely, and friends are for interacting with socially.

30 Comments



Garry Dyck on March 16, 2019 at 10:39 am

Great article.

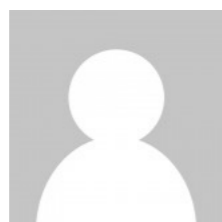
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Marsha McGuire on March 16, 2019 at 8:14 pm

I totally agree!!!

Reply



Jennifer on March 17, 2019 at 11:17 pm

I think there are signs you can get for your puppy that says" in training please ignore me." Those seem good so people can read them without you needing to tell them and make things awkward or taking attention from your dog.



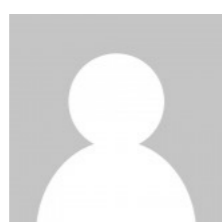
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Dee Pigman on March 16, 2019 at 9:05 pm

Amy Thank you for this. May I give a copy of this to my students?

Reply



Amy Cook on March 17, 2019 at 3:11 pm

Sure!

Reply



Sue on March 17, 2019 at 5:02 am

We call this process S. E. E. Which stands for Systematic Environmental Exposure.

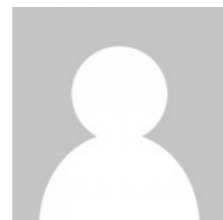
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Amy Cook on March 17, 2019 at 3:12 pm

Dogs need both skills! Some people we greet, some people we ignore. Trainers can train both skills better if the public will also help out!

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Pat Beasch on March 18, 2019 at 10:41 am

How do you decide who you greet and who you ignore?



Troy on March 17, 2019 at 6:42 am

Interesting insight. Thank you

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jvan2026@gmail.com on March 17, 2019 at 7:01 am

Wow. Thanks for training – me. I am the guy who wants to pet your dog! Never again. And I understand.

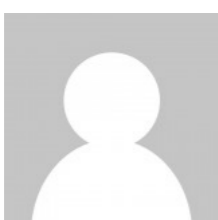
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Audrey on March 17, 2019 at 7:18 am

This is excellent!

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Reena Ealton on March 17, 2019 at 11:44 am

Good article. You have a very good point regarding dogs not socializing with everyone. I see many dogs in my classes that get overly excited if anyone comes remotely close to them or makes eye contact.

It seems to be mostly 3 breeds, but lots of others do this too. Dogs need to learn to pay more attention to their owners and less to other people. We spend lots of class time working on this.

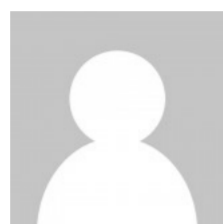
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Patricia R. Braasch on March 17, 2019 at 1:59 pm

So when someone says, "Oh, I love Golden Retrievers. Can I pet her?" I'm supposed to say "I'd rather you didn't." and walk on? I have seen dogs that just walk on by, but how do I teach this, particularly when I do have the Golden Retriever that EVERYONE wants to pet.

Reply



Amy Cook on March 17, 2019 at 3:08 pm

Try feeding her cookies steadily as you pass! If your dog isn't looking at people it's easier to walk on by and say "thanks, maybe next time!" 😊

Reply



Pat Braasch on March 18, 2019 at 10:46 am

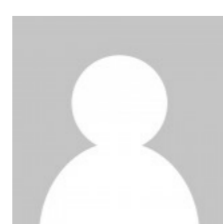
I will try this, but past experience tells me that dogs like Labs and Goldens actually prefer people to food.



Shannon on March 17, 2019 at 5:01 pm

You can try saying "thanks for asking, but we're training right now!" And be prepared for people to be offended. I constantly have people who are offended that they can only pet one of my two dogs (one doesn't enjoy attention from strangers), or that they can't pet either of my dogs. You have to have a thick skin - your dog is yours for YOUR enjoyment, not for every random stranger who wants to say hi!

Reply



mk on March 18, 2019 at 6:52 am

Spot on.



Michelle on March 18, 2019 at 9:35 pm

Yes, you say “no, but thank you for asking.”

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Paige on March 17, 2019 at 3:36 pm

I disagree with this approach. Coing over dogs doesn't make them poorly behaved. Bad training and reinforcement during that coing does. This perspective is confusing socializing with lack of training.

I also don't like the idea of ignoring dogs or not letting people pet my dog. What's the point of dog if we can't enjoy them and interact with them? What's wrong with getting pleasure from petting someone's dog, if the dog is willing to be pet?

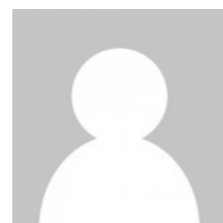
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Dianne on March 19, 2019 at 9:51 pm

I hear the author's POV but I agree with Paige! I want to enjoy my dogs and for others to do the same. It makes me smile when my dog is interacting with others because of the joy my dogs bring to others! It's an unselfish gesture.

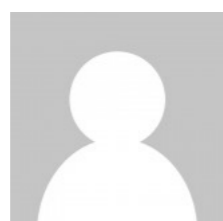
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Amy Cook on March 20, 2019 at 11:02 am

I like my dog interacting, too! The point isn't to raise dogs who don't ever interact with people, it's to be more choosy about who and when, and to mainly avoid the problem that goes the other direction, which is being magnetized to everyone. I definitely advocate that dogs learn how to greet people, and then when *both*

the new person and the owner agree that it's the right time, the dog can do it. That way you are able to say more easily how much you want of this in a given day, and you can prepare your dog's manners, assessing whether this one is too much for her right now, or just right. It's not about ignoring *all* people, just like it's not about greeting all of them. 😊



Anthony on March 20, 2019 at 10:25 am

Completely agree with you Paige

Reply



Lynne on March 17, 2019 at 4:27 pm

This is a great article, and it is precisely how we do it in the service dog world. It's amazing how many people feel that their need to interact with your dog is more important than the dogs training and success. You certainly wouldn't go up and start interacting with someone's young child. It should be no different with someone's dog.

Reply



Kimberly Campbell on March 17, 2019 at 10:56 pm

This is lovely, Amy. I think "socialization" is one of those scientifically defined words that doesn't translate well to normal speech. It isn't about socializing, it is about learning how to "be" and to be confident in the situations we expect them encounter later. Though I must admit that I tend to encourage folks to "socialize" their dogs to strangers (I'm a veterinarian). By this I mean that in an ideal world I would like pet dogs not to be afraid if a stranger does approach to pet them. Primarily because you are right, our culture means that sneak attacks by friendly people are far too common! I will have to think about how to rework my recommendations! As I learn more

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and more about behavior and training, the more surprised and frustrated I am to see folks out with their dogs but ignoring them completely (increasing the chance of ninja friendliness). As an example, your dog doesn't have a vested interest in going to the hardware store; you need to be giving some attention to your dog if you have chosen to take it away from its cozy home.

Thanks for your insight,
Kim



Emily on March 18, 2019 at 6:20 am

Thank you for this article. I use both a manual and power wheelchair and have been injured for 37 years. At 60, it's difficult to manage my two dogs at a combined weight of about 120 lbs when people come up and want to meet and greet especially with their dog. My dogs are trained to sit or lie down with the approach of another dog but sometimes the "owner" insists on the meeting. Please know when meeting a person on the street with their dogs - you can't have any idea about the dog and the physical capability of its owner.

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Michelle Mullens on March 18, 2019 at 12:23 pm

Amy, thank you for this great article. I'm grateful you're sharing information like this so fewer people will approach my now 10 month old Airedale with the idea they have a right to pet or feed or interact. When they do, it makes my job of training her to be a well-behaved canine citizen more challenging.

I've allowed calmer people to approach my dog and only when she is calm and sitting, to pet her briefly. I've never allowed anyone to give her treats. I do that, when she turns to look at me. I sporadically use a clicker, when I don't need four hands for holding and carrying everything LOL.

Will you please also address a breeder's responsibilities towards puppies regarding the way they learn about people before they go home with their families. I'd love to see an entire article about that topic.

In my experience, some breeders allow visitors to rough house a bit and interact with puppies who are excited, allowing bad behavior like biting and jumping up. Bad behaviors puppies learn when excited can be very very difficult to counteract.

The obedience trainer we've had for 6 months

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emphasizes that an excited dog is not learning or able to behave well in either human world or dog world.



Megan on March 20, 2019 at 5:03 am

Great article and good points but I specifically disagree that the term socialization should not be used. The definition of the word itself is learning to behave in a manner acceptable to society. So while being social may not be the goal, the ultimate goal of learning to be comfortable, non reactive, and not disruptive while out and about is all socialization in the true definition of the word.

Reply



Mo on March 20, 2019 at 6:44 pm

As a friend who is a veterinarian with dogs that she takes everywhere once told me "I train my dogs to be neutral NOT social." She has taken dogs that have had some serious dog aggression problems that are breeds that are primitive hunters and brought them to where they can go into a restaurant or can even be approached by aggressive loose dogs on the street and they do not react. The dogs are much more relaxed in their neutral mind set when out in public with people that may interact in many different ways. I'll take her method any day.

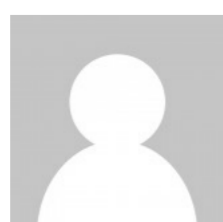
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Suzanne Clothier on March 20, 2019 at 8:01 pm

I partially agree, and indeed, just dragging a dog here & there is not socialization. But I disagree with just blocking interaction or stuffing a dog's face with chicken. I prefer by a landslide to actually teach a dog the specific skill of waiting for permission to greet someone, and to move away when asked. That teaches the dog that not everyone passing by will interact, and I have the opportunity to make the proactive decision about who my dogs interact with at any given moment. Rude dogs are created by handlers who fail to teach an orchestrated greeting. A dog can enjoy meeting strangers, and strangers can enjoy meeting dogs - but it's up to the handler to make the interaction productive for the dog's understanding of life.

Reply



Amy Cook on March 20, 2019 at 11:38 pm

We don't have to block and stuff!
There are many ways to

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effectively train what we need. What is good for people to recognize, though, is that ignoring people is a skill that has to be taught along with greeting them, and that we should be picking specifically who gets greeted and when in way that helps us mindfully to reach our goals. And, of course, to not have that continually challenged by every person wanting their “dog fix!” It’s up to the trainer to train the dog, but this would be helped mightily by people also learning that dogs are not public property to be squealed over. Let people and their dogs be, unless the situation is clearly socially welcome (and handleable) to all.

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