

SOCIALISATION / SOCIAL REFERENCING

What is socialisation?

Socialisation can be described as the process whereby an animal learns how to recognise and interact with its own species, i.e. dog to dog, other species such as cats and people. This interaction helps each learn the body language and communication skills of each other.

What is social referencing?

Social referencing can be described as the process whereby an animal becomes accustomed and desensitised to environmental factors so it learns to ignore them. This includes visual stimuli and sounds such as thunder, fireworks, doorbells etc. This is sometimes referred to as habituation.

Sometimes the term socialisation is used to encompass both the descriptions above.

Why do I need to ensure my dog gets sufficient socialisation & social referencing?

Socialisation and social referencing are essential to ensure that dogs become well-balanced companion animals. It helps them to deal with new situations it may encounter in the future and helps them deal with the range of people and experiences within its environment. It helps prevent future problems of nervousness or aggression.

How do I ensure my dog gets sufficient socialisation & social referencing?

Socialisation and social referencing starts with the breeder - see specific handouts for this information. Once you own a puppy you should implement your own programme, exposing your dog to as wide a range of experiences and positive encounters as is possible. See checklist. This exposure should start immediately and become diverse as soon as the puppy is fully vaccinated. It should continue ideally throughout the dog's life but essentially up until sexual maturity.

I have an older dog, is there anything I can do for him/her?

Yes behaviour modification and re-socialisation programmes can be implemented although the help of a behaviourist or experienced dog trainer may be required. Older dogs can be desensitised to unfamiliar or frightening situations gradually, but it will never replace the benefits of early socialisation.

My dog had a bad experience, what should I do?

Do not try and comfort the dog or react fearfully yourself as you will confirm the need for fear to the dog. The dog may look to you for guidance so remain confident. The dog should be re-exposed to the situation gradually and possibly from a distance so it becomes desensitised to it. Proximity can be increased as the dog's confidence grows. De-sensitisation tapes are available for sound related phobias and should be used very quietly at first with the volume being increased as desensitisation occurs. Always praise or reward the dog for not showing fear and not reacting to the situation, or if it does react, as soon as it recovers from its fright. If your dog reacts aggressively in a situation it is fearful of then a desensitisation programme can be implemented with the help of a behaviourist or trainer.

What else might affect socialisation?

Breeding, temperament of both parents, health both currently and as a puppy, involvement in training, diet, environment in which it was raised and lives, experiences as a puppy and adult.