

Dog Socialisation

Training your dog

If your dog has missed out on adequate socialisation within this period, they may view new experiences as negative or with fear when presented with them later in life. This can lead to stress and anxiety for you and your dog. If you think this situation applies to your dog, you will need to be proactive in giving them opportunities to build their confidence through regular and appropriate socialisation.

This can be more difficult and time-consuming than if done during the sensitive period and requires some skill, so you may need to enlist the help of a qualified behaviourist or trainer.

More information on how to choose a dog trainer or behaviourist can be found [here](#), or by visiting:

- [International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants](#)
- [Fellowship of Animal Behaviour Clinicians](#) (UK)
- [Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors](#) (International)
- [Certified Applied Animal Behaviorists](#) (USA)
- [American College of Veterinary Behaviorists](#)

Setting up for success

For successful socialisation, your dog first needs to feel safe and secure. If your dog is feeling unsettled, for example, due to a recent change of environment (see [Environment](#)) or living situation now may not be the best time for a new socialisation experience. The same applies for any type of training you wish to do with your dog.

To set your dog up for a positive socialisation experience, make sure they are:

- **Feeling comfortable.** Your dog should be rested, healthy and content and not hungry or thirsty (see [Health](#), and [Environment](#))
- **In the right mindset.** Ideally, your dog should be calm but attentive going into the socialisation experience. If your dog is over-excited, they may be too aroused to process and retain information
- **Ready for the next step.** Be guided by your dog's reaction. A little hesitation is ok; extreme fear and distress are not. Make sure your dog is in control of the interaction and can ultimately feel successful and empowered in overcoming a new challenge or experience





Make sure you:

- **Have a plan.** At first, the number of new experiences young puppies are exposed to should be few and varied, then increased over time and repeated once they gain confidence
- **Know your dog.** Remember that each dog has their own personality and individual characteristics (for more on this see [Individuality](#)). Some dogs will naturally be more outgoing and others more shy and reserved. Make sure that you adjust socialisation experiences, including the frequency, intensity and duration of exposure, dependent on the individual dog's needs and preferences
- **Understand how to monitor the situation.** Watch your dog carefully for signs of stress or discomfort such as avoidance, lip licking, panting, yawning or cowering and intervene if needed. For example, if your dog appears fearful at a busy road, next time pause farther away from the road and gradually move closer as your dog feels more comfortable (see [Introduction](#) for tips on reading a dog's body language)



Remember you can't reinforce an emotion, so don't be afraid to reassure and treat your dog if they're behaving in a fearful manner.

- **Praise and reward your dog** to reinforce demonstrations of desired positive behaviour or interactions with other people and animals. This also helps in building a positive emotional response to the presence of particular objects and being in certain places or situations (for example the car or the veterinary clinic). Rewards can be used to help ensure a socialisation experience is a positive one, helping to improve emotional satisfaction. Rewards could be in the form of positive displays of affection, play/games and/or food/treats. Be mindful of what your dog likes and use these during socialisation. Take care to treat responsibly (see [Nutrition](#)).
- **Are calm and composed.** As you introduce your dog to the new experience, you should remain relaxed and confident throughout. This makes it likely that your dog will respond accordingly and feel more secure

Dog training methods. Which is best?

Terms such as clicker training, dominance, positive reinforcement, shaping, operant conditioning, punishment and alpha are commonly used in the dog training world but what does it all mean and what is the best way to train your dog? Unfortunately, the dog training industry is largely unregulated so finding credible information and practitioners to support you and your dog can be challenging. The recommended approach is to build up a strong bond with your dog, while employing evidence-based, positive reinforcement training. Conversely, avoid using aversive training methods as they have been shown to negatively impact dog welfare. (See [Health](#) for more information on behaviour and training)

Reading your dog's body language

By better understanding your dog's body language you can recognise situations where they feel uncomfortable, stressed, or afraid and you can intervene on their behalf. This helps to prevent conflict and physical injury, as well as emotional trauma for all involved. Body language is also a powerful tool for recognising when our dog might be unwell (see [Health](#)) and can be used to guide positive socialisation and training experiences. All of this is obviously key for the optimal emotional wellbeing of your dog.





A dog exhibiting subtle signs of fear or stress, such as lip-licking, turning away, or averting their eyes, may nip or bite if approached

A dog's likes and dislikes

Better understanding your dog's body language is also important as it helps shape your understanding of your dog's likes and dislikes, how you interact with your dog and consequently what you might decide to do with your dog. Determining when your dog feels uncomfortable can suggest training opportunities that might help your dog feel more secure.

A dog usually signals any aggressive intentions to avoid the possibility of a fight and will rarely bite 'out of the blue'.

Some of the more easily recognisable signals may include:

- Stiffening
- Growling
- Baring teeth
- Snarling
- Lunging
- Snapping

Other warning signs of aggression may go unnoticed. An interesting way to think of a dog's response to a stressful event is as a ladder with steps.

See [*the Ladder of Aggression/Communication*](#) by the PDSA to learn more.

See [Socialisation](#) for more information about dog-dog body language and play.

Learn more about socialisation and emotional wellbeing for your pets at [shine.waltham.com](https://www.shine.waltham.com)

