



SOCIALIZATION vs. ACCLIMATION

*Adapted from original article by Molly Sumridge (Sumner)
CDBC, CPDT-KSA, CBATI, CWRI*

Did you ever hear someone say that they're "socializing" their dogs when they're out in public? Unfortunately, people sometimes confuse "socialization" with "acclimation". In dogs, the critical socialization window happens when he's just 5-16 weeks old! That means the dog that was adopted at 6 months of age can no longer be socialized by just being exposed to things. It's just not possible. The flexibility of the brain is no longer there. Now when that dog is being brought out into public, acclimation may be taking place. Acclimation is the process of becoming accustomed (acclimated) to a particular environment. If a dog has been properly socialized early on as well, he may be able to apply the things he learns during the process of acclimation to other, similar situations in the future. Without properly early socialization, however, that generalization is far less likely.

A dog can only acclimate based on previous experiences. Things that are alien or overwhelming may not become familiar enough through acclimation to stop seeming like threats. Instead the dog may develop a fear of the thing or situation they are exposed to. This fear can eventually turn into aggression if not addressed properly. A dog who's spent his life on a farm, in a kennel, or in any singular environment may never stop feeling overwhelmed when he's taken into new surroundings and for dogs in that situation, systematic behavior modification may be necessary.

A contributing factor to the behavior problems that can arise from unpleasant experiences during acclimation, especially when a dog has missed his critical socialization period, is that he feels forced the dog to stay in a situation that he wishes to leave. It is a myth that all dogs will "get over it" or "learn to deal". When a dog begins to feel overwhelmed, over-excited, or uncomfortable, forcing them to stay in the situation fills their body and brain with stress hormones, eventually causing the dog to experience something called "flooding". During flooding the dog may appear to calm down and look like they are putting up with the situation when in actuality they may be experiencing trauma. The next time they are faced with the same situation they could be even more uncomfortable and possibly lash out.

Leash aggression/reactivity is one specific behavior problem that can arise from incorrect acclimation and flooding. Because the dog is trapped on a leash and cannot escape, this can increase a dog's stress in unfamiliar places. A dog may develop a behavior of lunging at people or other animals to make them go away. Think about it from the dog's perspective. They are frightened and when they lunge at something, the thing goes away or they are removed. Now

both you and the dog feel great stress over the situation. You want them to like dogs and people but your dog is not enjoying the situation. Perhaps it even seems like your dog is “reacting out of nowhere”. However dogs communicate in canine body language that they are not comfortable but most owners are not versed in this communication. When the dog does not feel heard, they will do whatever it takes to feel safe again.

All is not lost if you have adopted or purchased a dog that is older than 16 weeks. Many dogs can learn to like public places, but it requires slow, purposeful interactions that leave the dog feeling safe, comfortable, and empowered.

1. Learn basic canine body language. It is imperative you know if your dog is feeling uncomfortable and dogs give off a dozen small signals to let you know they're uncomfortable. Look for things like lip licking, yawning, turning away, tucked tail, whining, and paw lifting. All signs of discomfort and should be respected. Bigger signs like growling should not be scolded but the dog should be removed and given time to calm down.
2. Be willing to leave. Don't have your heart set on a specific interaction or outcome. Be flexible and let your dog's comfort level dictate where you go and what you do. Be prepared to leave a location immediately if your dog is not comfortable. You can always try again later but don't force them to stay even if leaving is inconvenient.
3. Your dog doesn't need to say hello to everyone. Don't expect your dog to fall in love with your family, friends, or spouse right away. Start slow and let them determine how quickly they interact with people. Have people greet your dog by feeding them and touching them under the chin. Avoid contact with top of the head until the dog is familiar and comfortable with the people they're interacting with.
4. Food! Feed your dog special treats like real chicken, cheese, or steak, while they are interacting with new people or visiting new places. These treats give the dog a sense of happiness and contentment and will impress that feeling on whatever they are interacting with.
5. Greet other dogs slowly and in short bursts. Keep the interactions down to 5 or 10 seconds at first so your dog can be given the chance to say no or stop before they feel forced to snap at the other dog to end the interaction.
6. Take it slow! Start with your street. Help your dog get used to traffic, neighbors, and the pace of your neighborhood. As your dog gets more comfortable, add busier, newer locations. Don't take objects for granted. Garbage cans, strollers, skateboards and other everyday objects can be terrifying to dogs who have never seen them before.

Adopt a plan to help teach your dog about the great world around them. Celebrate the small wins and watch your dog grow comfortable in social situations and flourish!