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## Socializing Dogs

Making sure your dog is well socialized with other people, animals, and experiences is crucial to having a happy, well-adjusted, behaved companion. Dogs have a 'golden window' during puppy hood when they are most impressionable. Puppies who are introduced to new situations in a positive, fun manner during this time period gain confidence. This sense of confidence decreases the puppy's chance of becoming fearful or aggressive later on. This impressionable window occurs when puppies are 6-12 weeks old. However, this is also the time period when puppies are not fully vaccinated and are very susceptible to contagious, sometimes fatal, diseases. Please make sure your puppy is on a vaccination schedule with your veterinarian and do not bring your puppy to high risk areas, like dog parks, etc. until fully vaccinated. Exposing your puppy to new things under carefully controlled circumstances is best, like taking he/she to puppy kindergarten.

It will take much more patience and time to build confidence in an older dog, however, there is no reason to give up. Consider consulting a professional dog trainer for guidance and evaluation. Although uncommon, some older fearful dogs may not be able to overcome their fears. Always consult a dog trainer or behaviorist if your dog shows any signs of aggression.

How you introduce your dog or puppy to new experiences is also very important. If the dog does show fear (cowering, ears down, shaking, tucked tail, barking), do not try to comfort or soothe him/her. Your dog may interpret your comforting as praise for the fearful behavior. Instead, act very relaxed and calm while you approach the new thing and ignore the fearful behavior (if possible). As soon as the dog shows signs of relaxation (ears up, wagging tail, standing taller) praise the dog and give a tiny food treat. Do not try to push a fearful dog into confrontation with a scary situation as this will just make he/she more panicked. You must work very slowly. Once you witness and praise a relaxed response take a break and do something else fun. Return to this previously fearful situation later and repeat above. The more the dog is exposed to this new thing and gets positive reinforcement for acting calm, the closer you should be able to encourage your dog to get to the object. Again, don't force anything if the dog is acting scared. It will take time and patience to build confidence. If you are having problems with the above protocol, please consult a dog trainer.