SO-CIAL-IZE

To make social; *especially*: to fit or train for a social environment. From Merriam-Webster Dictionary.

This definition is perfectly accurate when it comes to helping our dogs learn to get along in the world.

I want to tell the story of a young toy poodle named Pepper who came into my dog daycare years ago. The first time I met Pepper he was about a year old. He was extremely shy and shook uncontrollably when Susan (his owner) put him on the floor after carrying him in. I asked Susan what Peppers' experience was with other dogs. Susan said "none." I said, "you mean in all this time Pepper has not met any other dogs?" Susan said, "I did not know it was important." Folks, it is critically important.

Imagine yourself as a kid again, isolated from other kids and social situations for the first six years of your life. Placed out of your very limited comfort zone you would not know what to say, do, or how to act. Your social skills would be clumsy at best. You would experience a scary psychological twilight zone. That is what I saw in Peppers' eyes.

I held myself back the best I could and did not lecture Susan about what she should have done to prevent this. Instead, I tried to explain that now we have to try to rehabilitate Pepper, through what might be a long process of exposing him to his fears and desensitizing him. Peppers' first year was lost, and irreversible mental damage was done. It was as if part of his brain had not developed. Three years later Pepper still came to daycare. He did improve over time, was not afraid of dogs in the daycare and allows them to approach him. However he never initiates play and never makes a first move. Finally he allowed other dogs to lie next to him. With people he is backward and reserved. On a bright note, he stopped shaking and did allow me to put him on my lap. Progress was painfully slow, and he still had a long way to go.

This brings up the question of how this situation could have been prevented. First off, dogs are social animals. The socialization process begins in the litter when the puppy is born. Once taken away from its littermates, the human owner must see to it that the puppy learns socialization skills, and gains confidence through exposure. This is the owner's responsibility. We always tell puppy owners their dog needs to interact with at least a hundred different dogs and people of all sorts in their first six months of life. This process should continue throughout the dogs' life. Socializing heavily creates an insurance policy for your dog against antisocial behavior.

Once your puppy is fully vaccinated, here are some ideas for gradually exposing pup to socialize with new people, animals, and environments. These times need to be in a controlled, positive manner to build confidence and prevent fear or aggression.

- Take your pup to Petsmart, Petco, Tractor Supply, and other pet-friendly stores for meet and greets.
- Go to farmers markets. Let people talk to him, pet him if he's not afraid. If they have a friendly dog, it is a good time for introductions,
- Go on walks with him in your neighborhood and join up with friendly dogs and people,
- Get him on a variety of surfaces: cement, dirt, wood, rubber mats, gravel, etc.
- If he seems afraid, be careful not to push him too far out of his comfort zone too fast. Repeated exposure over time will work best.
- Keep all interactions and new experiences positive

Roger Nelson, Green Valley Canine