

# Golden Retriever Rescue of Wisconsin, Inc.

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**Understanding Socialization****GRRoW Hotline: 888-655-4753**

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## **Understanding Socialization**

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Many dog owners have heard how important it is for them to socialize their new dogs and puppies. However, socialization is much more than just taking your new dog or puppy to as many places as possible. Socialization is the basis for teaching your dog how to fit into your life and into society. It helps your dog develop confidence and accept his current and future surroundings. Without a thorough understanding of how to properly socialize a dog, sometimes more damage than good can be done.

Before we embark on socializing our newly adopted dog, we must first understand how a dog's mind works. To keep things simple, you can stick to my motto of "Any behavior that is rewarded will be repeated". Simply put, this means if your dog likes something, he will usually try to make it happen again. The opposite is also true. If your dog receives a negative response to something, he will most likely want to avoid that situation in the future. With that said, we have the very basic basis of how our dogs are thinking.

Using this theory of thinking, it is important to keep in mind that by socializing we need to create positive experiences and avoid the negative ones. Sounds easy enough! Right? Well, the challenge comes in being able to read your dog's body language and know when to proceed and when to slow down. Introducing your dog or puppy to a new situation properly can mean the difference between a calm, confident dog or a fearful, timid dog in this future situation.

For instance, in the first scenario, Pablo is a newly adopted Golden Retriever. He has never been to a festival before. His owners take time introducing him to people slowly, keeping him on the outskirts of the commotion until he is comfortable. They use their obedience training to get him focused by having him sit, lie down, stay and come. He is kept on a loose but controlled leash and the owners are calm and collected. They reward his calm behavior with treats and praise. They only allow strangers to give him a cookie and not overwhelm him with petting or reaching into his space uninvited. Pablo had a rewarding experience (praise, treats, and attention). He will most likely look forward to entering his next group of people with confidence.

In the second scenario, the same dog is taken to the same festival. The new owners take him directly into the crowded areas. They allow strangers to pet him even though he is being shy and fearful. When he becomes even more shy and fearful the owners stroke him and tell him he's fine. Pablo is kept on a tight leash because he is scared and pulling away. Pablo is overwhelmed and has had a negative experience. Pablo was forced to accept petting he did not want, making groups of people seem scary. Pablo was rewarded with soft talk and petting for his fearful behavior. Pablo felt the need to be tense because his leash was tight and "choking" him...therefore he may think that groups of people choke him. Pablo will most likely be fearful and anxious in groups of people from now on.

It should be clear now that socialization is not just about taking your dog to as many places as you can. What is most important is *how* you introduce him to new situations. So now you may be asking, how do I make sure I socialize my dog properly? The answer is fairly easy. Go slowly. Set him up to succeed. Do not force a dog into situations he finds fearful. Break it down slowly until he feels comfortable. Teach your dog basic obedience, it will come in very useful!

When introducing a dog to a new situation. I always use baby steps. Start with the lowest amount of stimulus possible (stand on the outskirts of the festival so he can watch) but somewhere he can see the new situation. If he seems comfortable at that distance, do some sit-stays and reward with a treat or praise and move closer to your destination until you finally reach it. Repeat this and continue praising calm behavior *before* any anxious or

nervous behavior begins. Prevention is the key to socialization. We do not want to wait to get a nervous response before starting socialization, start it before your dog even has a chance to become fearful!

If your dog does become fearful do not “coo and coddle” your dog and soothe him. These sounds and touches *actually* praise your dog for the fearful behavior! He will think of your affection as a reward for his fear. Instead, ignore the fear and backtrack to the last place you were before your dog showed anxiety. Restart by rewarding for calm behavior and just move more slowly this time to the destination. Your dog was just telling you he was not ready. Remember that your dog looks to you for direction. If you are confident and calm, your dog will feel more at ease. Keep this in mind whenever you are working in a fearful situation.

When you reach your destination or object he was fearful of. Allow him to get comfortable for a moment, treat and praise, and walk away. You want to leave *before* you have a negative experience. Practice walking to and from the object or situation several times before you stay there. For instance, if your dog is afraid of a bicycle, use your baby steps to get him there. Have him smell the bicycle and praise with a treat and a Good Boy! Turn and walk away 10-20 feet. Walk towards the bicycle again. He should be much more comfortable already. Repeat this until he has no fear of the object at all.

Take your time introducing your Golden to new things and make it a rewarding experience. You will see a nervous or shy dog transformed into a self-assured dog oozing with confidence. If the event of a dog that is very shy or nervous in general, I always recommend contacting a specialized trainer before you start your socialization process to ensure you start out on the right foot. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure!

*Kate Schoepke is the behaviorist on staff at My Pet's Vet in Mequon, WI.*

About Kate:

Kate Schoepke is the certified canine behaviorist at My Pet's Vet in Mequon, WI. She grew up surrounded by animals including dogs, cats, horses, rats, potbellied pigs and anything else she could convince her parents to let her keep. Her interest in training started at a young age when she began successfully training and competing horses. She took her horse training skills to the dogs and slowly began studying their behavior and training her own family pets. In 2002 Kate was out of college and working at a veterinary clinic. She decided to further her talent in animal behavior and attended the Animal Behavior College. She received her degree and graduated with high honors. Kate has been teaching obedience classes and private lessons ever since. She recently joined forces with Dr. Ron Beatty at My Pet's Vet in Mequon and continues to see private consultations in Ozaukee and Milwaukee counties.

