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GOOD DOG! *by: DONNA REYNOLDS on JULY 1, 2017*

BRUSH UP ON SOCIALIZATION THIS SUMMER

Summer skies are smiling, and the days are filled with opportunities for dogs to interact with other dogs. Good socialization is important, but there are ideal and less-than ideal ways to accomplish the goal of giving dogs the experiences they need to practice their social skills.

When dog owners think about socializing, the first thing that typically comes to mind is ... dog parks! Cutting loose, wrestling, chasing toys with dozens of other dogs. What could be better? Doggy adrenaline runs high in dog parks where excitement is the name of the game, and younger dogs especially enjoy the chaos. An ever-changing mosh of canine personalities can bring challenges, too, including a heightened risk of conflict if one or more dogs clash over a toy or unanticipated personal offense. While it's normal for dogs to argue at times, a more serious fight can scar a dog's opinion of other dogs and make him less tolerant of dogs for the long term. This is what dog parents mean when they report to their trainers, "He used to be great with dogs until he had a bad experience at the dog park."

Can we “re-train” a dog that’s had a bad experience with strange dogs to enjoy them again? In many cases, and within limits, yes. However, depending on the dog’s personality and circumstances, re-socialization takes a lot of time, it’s stressful, and it involves tightly curating a dog’s list of friends to build on only the most positive experiences with known pals that he trusts. And still, there are no guaranteed outcomes. Preventing that first damaging experience is still the very best cure.

Helping dogs steer clear of scuffles so they can stay as dog-social as they’re able is every dog owner’s duty and begins with staying realistic about their dog’s individual likes, limits, and maturing personality. Rough play can be great fun when they’re just “kids,” but as they age, many lose patience and become more selective about dogs and the types of interactions they’ll allow. Selectivity is not a failure on anybody’s part, by the way—it’s a natural part of being a dog, no matter his breed type.

How do we keep dogs socialized, then, if larger parks bring drawbacks? You have options! Organized play groups that attract a smaller number of dogs offer a huge advantage by allowing you to monitor the interactions and decide if the personalities you see match your dog’s likes and dislikes and play style. Some people utilize backyards, fenced-in ball fields, tennis courts, and small, low-traffic neighborhood parks for their fun time.

If your dog is hitting the “less-tolerant” stage of his life, it may be time to end dog park use and instead find one or two dog owners in your area who are willing to start a small, social group with you. Find them by signing up for obedience classes, neighborhood discussion lists, or dog hiking groups. Your dog will love making regular dog friends, and less stress for you is a good thing, too. If you’re extra motivated to find play buddies for your dog, consider signing up to be a foster home for a local shelter or rescue group, and tell them you’d like to be matched with dogs whose personalities are right for your dog. It’s a win-win and a great way to give back. Best of luck, and have a wonderful summer.

Donna Reynolds is the co-founder and executive director of BADRAP and keeps the Bay Area nonprofit rescue organization on track with projects that fulfill its mission to “Secure the future of the American Pit Bull Terrier as a cherished family companion.” Currently, she directs the activities of BADRAP’s Rescue Barn, a modest shelter for homeless dogs-in-crisis as well as a working classroom for adopters, shelter staff and rescue workers. A committed educator, she’s written several articles on pit bulls, she develops many of BR’s educational materials and presents the group’s program models widely to audiences around the country. Learn more about BR at BADRAP.org.

Each month, this column is written by a different trainer or dog professional. If you’d like to contribute, contact Editor@BayWoof.com.