



Tibetan Mastiff Puppy Socialization

Socialization is the key to raising a confident, well-rounded and well-adjusted puppy, but there seems to be a wide range of understanding as to what the term socialization actually means. Here, we share what it means at Noble Legacy Tibetan Mastiffs and how we have successfully raised generations of family pets with predictable and reliable temperaments that can be taken anywhere and introduced to anyone, while retaining their natural guardian instincts.

Before we start, we need to go back to basics. What is temperament, where does it come from, and what influence do we, as owners, have on how it is cultivated in a young pup? Contrary to what most people believe, temperament is genetic, not learned behavior. It is NOT all about how you raise them. “Temperament has been defined as an animal’s personality, makeup, disposition, or nature. A longer definition of temperament is “individual differences in behavior that are biologically based” (1). Temperament is an inherent trait, as inborn as any instinct a dog may have. We can shape it, manage it, or even adapt our lifestyles to accommodate it, but we cannot train it out of the dog or change it. “Temperament is an individual’s natural predisposition to react in a certain way to a stimulus. Behaviors related to temperament may be modified over time with exposure and learning” (2). While we cannot train out innate traits such as temperament and instincts, we can shape character (learned behavioral responses and ways of coping with the environment, developed through interaction with the dog’s environment). The very first things any puppy buyer needs to consider, then, is the genetics behind their puppy, and look for a breeder who recognizes the inherit heritable nature of temperament and understands how to assess and test for proper temperament. There are a multitude of temperaments test available to breeders and research has shown demonstrated the accuracy and value of these tests (3). Our goal is to work with a dog’s innate temperament to accomplish the goals that we desire, and that is done through socialization and training, not forced compliance or submission.

One of the best pieces of advice I ever received regarding raising puppies was to introduce at least one new thing every day. Whether it be a new toy, a new place, a new sound, a new taste, a new person, or any other stimuli, it is critical that puppies, from birth, recognize that a new experience is an opportunity for exploring and learning, not a reason for stress or fear. This is, in a nutshell, what we call socialization: “Socialization is the process of preparing a dog or cat to enjoy interactions and be comfortable with other animals, people, places and activities” (4). Studies have shown that the critical age for puppy socialization is from 3-12 weeks (5)(6)(7), and further studies have shown that by 4-6 months of age, a puppy’s temperament and character are set. “A dog’s personality is mostly shaped in the first four-months of the puppy’s life and this will have a pronounced impact on the puppy that will last a lifetime. After the first 16-weeks it is not realistic to think we will change the dog’s temperament (pre-disposition) (8).” “These first 16-weeks are a short period of time when exposure to people, places and things can have long lasting effects on the puppy’s behavior. It is during this time that the dog’s reactivity or fear responses will increase or decrease depending on the environment and its life experiences or lack thereof (9).”

At Noble Legacy, we start socializing puppies from birth. Puppies are born in our home, and are picked up, held, cuddled, rubbed, and talked to (or sung to). They are conditioned to the sound and feel of the human touch from the moment they are born. I cannot emphasize enough the difference the environment plays at this age, and Tibetan Mastiff puppies whelped and raised in barns or outdoor sheds or kennels are completely different

from puppies raised inside the home. There is no way to re-do or make up for the socialization missed in those early days. We use Early Neurological Stimulation (ENS) starting at 3 days of age to begin the introduction of new tactile experiences that have been shown to enhance responses to stress later in life. “Early Neurological Stimulation is a concept developed by Dr Carmen Battaglia, a breeder, AKC judge, researcher and writer. It encompasses tactile stimulation, thermal stimulation and exposure to mild stressors, which improve your puppies’ stress responses” (10). Building on a foundation of ENS, we continue the socialization process using Puppy Culture techniques and strategies (11). Pups are introduced to a large sleep and playground area around 3-4 weeks with numerous tactile surfaces (foam squares, artificial turf, etc.), a mobile play gym, a ball pit, a tunnel, and a slide, in addition to a wide assortment of toys of various sizes, shapes, and textures. Wholetones instrumental music plays 24/7. Select family members and friends begin to visit for introductions to “strangers”. At 4-5 weeks, pups begin to venture outdoors for play time, where there is endless exposure to new sights, sounds, and surfaces. We do not shield them from normal activities and sounds, but sit in the yard with them while they see and hear a lawn mower or weed-eater for the first time, the garbage truck picks up and clashes the cans, or delivery trucks come up the driveway. They see and hear how their dam and our other dogs respond, so they get a sense of what is expected of them. They are never left unattended, and if anything startles them, we immediately help them navigate the situation in a positive manner. We give initial parvo only vaccines at 6 weeks, and the fun begins! We have a steady stream of visitors to play with the puppies, and begin car rides to meet family and enjoy ice cream treats! By the time our pups leave us at 10-12 weeks, they have met 40-50 people, gone on 2-3 car ride adventures, and experienced most everyday events that they will encounter in a normal household. As breeders, we have done all we can do to encourage confidence and curiosity in our pups. The rest is up to you.

New puppy owners have a responsibility to continue socialization in their home. This means continuing to expose them to new people, places, and things, while still under the supervision of the owner. Your puppy has bonded with you and is depending on you to keep him/her safe. *My favorite piece of advice is this: It is the owners responsibility to protect your puppy until the puppy is old enough to protect you.* This means, you are physically present with your puppy to plan, supervise, and control structured social situations for your puppy. “Owners of a juvenile or adult dog often have the misguided belief that letting their dog run free at a dog park, placing them in doggie daycare, or taking them on leash to a big chain pet store where the dog ends up straining at the end of the leash to either get to other dogs, or to avoid other dogs, is a way to socialize the dog. These unstructured experiences are not a socialization program; they may do more harm than good” (12). While a puppy will mimic what he sees in other dogs, what he needs to know is what YOU expect of him. Interactions with other dogs cannot replace time spent with you, teaching and training your pup the behaviors and manners he/she needs to be a welcome member of your household. “Socializing” by letting a puppy run loose in the yard or dog park with other dogs only ensures that the puppy will pick up the behaviors and habits of other dogs, whether good or bad.

Start by introducing your puppy to new experiences in their home before expanding those experiences to the outside world. Invite visitors to come into your home and teach your puppy the appropriate way to meet strangers. We use the word “Friends!” when someone new comes to visit, using a happy and excited tone of voice. My dogs have learned that “Friends!” means our visitors have been mom approved and they are about to get lots of pets and love, and possibly treats! They love new Friends! They are either kenneled or kept on leash until the visitor has had a chance to get fully into the house or yard and the dogs have had a chance to calm down. We introduce 1 or 2 dogs at a time rather than having the whole gang rushing forward in excitement and overwhelming the person. I call it “controlled chaos”. It is critical for a guardian breed such as a Tibetan Mastiff to learn that it is acceptable for visitors to come into their territory. Otherwise, you run the risk of having a dog

that won't allow anyone they don't know to come into your home or yard; even friends or family members that you would like to have visit. In such a case, your dog's protectiveness becomes a liability.

Start from the minute you get your puppy home, and invite anyone and everyone who is willing to come meet your puppy to do so, take your puppy for leashed walks, and enroll in a puppy socialization and basic obedience class, taking precautions to mitigate any risks of exposure to communicable diseases, such as parvo. Even the American Veterinary Medical Association advocates this approach, and recognizes the importance of early socialization: "While veterinarians are appropriately concerned about infectious disease in young puppies, the fact is that behavioral issues—not infectious diseases—are the number one cause of death for dogs under 3 years of age, according to the AVSAB" (13)(14).

Socialization can take many forms, and is not a one-size-fits-all concept. Tailor your pup's experiences and length of socialization time to match what your pup's needs. Observe your puppy's reactions in each new situation for signs of stress. While studies have shown "that controlled early exposure to a variety of age-appropriate exercises and controlled exposure to noises and novel objects has a positive influence on stress-coping ability" (15), the exposure must be geared to the age, developmental stage, and coping abilities of the puppy at the time. If your is trying to pull or run away, hide, is shaking or cowering, or showing other signs of discomfort, make adjustments or remove the puppy from the situation completely and try again with a different approach. It often helps to have another, older, more experienced dog to share new experiences with. Patience is the key, especially with a Tibetan Mastiff puppy. Their instincts are to be wary of people and things they aren't familiar with, as a precaution, and they need time to process and assess the potential threat level they are encountering. This may mean short exposures over a period of time (commonly called conditioning), or it may mean sitting quietly holding your puppy until he/she comes to grip with the situation and determines there is no threat, or it may mean tabling the experience until the puppy has matured and gained more confidence. A puppy does not have the maturity to "push past his fear". Pushing a puppy into an uncomfortable situation that he/she is not yet prepared for enhances the fear response and evokes fear-based behaviors at a time when the puppy has not yet developed adequate mechanisms to cope with stress and fear, setting the stage for behavioral problems and aggression down the road (16).

Puppy socialization takes time and commitment on the part of the owner, but the pay-off is a happy and confident adult that can be trusted in almost any situation. It enhances psychological, cognitive, and emotional intelligence, and provides the puppy with the tools needed to navigate the world in which it lives. To summarize the need for puppy socialization: Do it early, and do it often.

Deborah Mayer

03/2025

References:

1. What is Temperament? American Kennel Club, <https://www.akc.org/akctemptest/what-is-temperament/>
2. Overview of the AKC Temperament Test, Burch & Ljungren, <https://www.akc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/ATT-OVERVIEW-FINAL-Aug-28-2019.pdf>
3. Burch, Mary R, Assessment of Canine Temperament: Predictive or Prescriptive? International Journal of Comparative Psychology, https://escholarship.org/content/qt4mw7n5tj/qt4mw7n5tj_noSplash_1de1af5245af603f7cbb4646efde2f8c.pdf?t=qmrv6i

4. American Veterinary Medical Association, <https://www.avma.org/resources-tools/animal-health-and-welfare/socialization-dogs-and-cats>
5. Texas A&M University, Veterinary Medicine and Biological Sciences, The Puppy Timeline: A Socialization Guide, <https://vetmed.tamu.edu/news/pet-talk/puppy-socialization/>
6. Puppy raising tips: Introducing ENS and ESI puppy stimulation exercises <https://pupstartsbreeders.com/puppy-raising-tips-ens-and-esi/>
7. National Institutes of Health: Optimising Puppy Socialisation—Short- and Long-Term Effects of a Training Programme during the Early Socialisation Period, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9687081/>
8. Homeschooling4dogs.com, Dogs Developmental Periods, <https://www.homeschooling4dogs.com/dog-developmental-periods>
9. Homeschooling4dogs.com, Dogs Developmental Periods, <https://www.homeschooling4dogs.com/dog-developmental-periods>
10. Pupstartsbreeders.com, Puppy Raising Tips: Introducing ENS and ESI Puppy Stimulation Exercises, <https://pupstartsbreeders.com/puppy-raising-tips-ens-and-esi/>
11. Puppy Culture, What is Puppy Culture? <https://shoppuppyculture.com/pages/about-puppy-culture>
12. Homeschooling4Dogs, Socialization, A Dog's Developmental Periods, <https://www.homeschooling4dogs.com/socialization>
13. American Veterinary Medical Association, Behavior Society Supports Early Puppy socialization, <https://www.avma.org/javma-news/2008-10-01/behavior-society-supports-early-puppy-socialization>
14. American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior, AVSAB Position Statement On Puppy Socialization, <https://avsab.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Puppy-Socialization-Position-Statement-FINAL.pdf>
15. National Institutes of Health: Optimising Puppy Socialisation—Short- and Long-Term Effects of a Training Programme during the Early Socialisation Period, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9687081/>
16. Journal of Veterinary Behavior, Analysis of Correlations Between Early Social Exposure and Reported Aggression In The Dog, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1558787816301411>