



# Socialization Socializing

by Ed Bailey

*Primary socialization—social skills learned through play—will be used in dog social interactions later in life.*

**O**f all the animal behavior jargon bandied around by professionals and even more by the hordes of pseudo-behaviorists (wannabes), there is no word more often misused than “socialization.” I have been told in all seriousness that socialization is occurring everywhere from in the litter with Mom and the sibs (and here it actually is going on) to taking Dog for a walk in the park for socialization with all the other dogs (where it actually is not going on) to walking the dog around the shopping plaza for people socialization and all sorts of other socialization scenarios. I even knew one rather low-life guy who walked his Weimaraner several times a week on the campus of a very select college for girls. He tried to make me believe this was for the dog’s socialization. My point is that most of what people refer to as socialization really ain’t.

Socialization is a learning process. Though it takes place and is completed in a relatively brief period early in an animal’s life, it acts to direct behaviors which develop later, mostly after sexual maturity. (“Animals” as used here embraces all warm-blooded vertebrates, among which are dogs and people.) This early learning process enables animals to recognize and behave normally toward members of their own species. It allows animals to direct social behavior toward the biologically correct species.

In dogs, the socialization process begins some weeks before birth and continues until 12 to 14 weeks of age, or at least as long as the pups are left in the litter with Mom and the other kids. Wild canids and feral dogs don’t break up the family group as early as we do with our domesticated dogs. Taking pups from the litter too early will interfere with the process by cutting it too short.

During this process of socialization animals learn their species’ specific language, be it a vocal language, body language or combination of both. They learn in an immature way their own species’ specific social behaviors, which can then be expressed correctly in an adult

form when the particular applicable situation occurs later in life. Social relationships like sexual, dominant-subordinate, care-dependency, leader-follower, aggressive interactions, and the signals that go with these relationships, to mention a few, are practiced in play fashion and incorporated into lifelong patterns through this process of socialization.

An animal deprived of normal socialization on its parent(s) and sibs rarely fits in with its own species. It doesn’t know how to interact socially or what the signals mean. It doesn’t understand the language, be it body signals or vocal ones. Sexual behavior of dogs taken from a litter prior to three weeks and hand-reared was compared with dogs left in the litter until 12 weeks. When they reached their first heat, all dogs had the desire but those taken from the litter early had no notion of how to go about it. The 12-weeks-in-litter dogs did fine.

So the process of socialization, though complete before many of the behaviors which it influences occur, not only acts to identify the biologically correct species so behaviors are not directed toward an inappropriate animal, but also teaches the animal what the signals mean and how to respond appropriately. Many of the behaviors occur as a juvenile play form and are not too obvious during the early learning period, but will appear full blown later in the animal’s life. We should refer to this process as *primary socialization*. Primary socialization is dog on dogs. People are not necessary for this socialization process in dogs. And in the strict sense, primary socialization of dogs on people does not occur.

But what is all this we hear almost daily of someone socializing his dog or his litter of puppies? True, a process occurs in dogs between three and 12 weeks of age which appears to be interspecific socialization. During this time puppies form the basis of a partial social relationship with people. And if pups have no exposure to people during this critical period between three and 12 weeks, they are fearful of people, can

# n, Bonding And



*Secondary socialization—the process of forming social relationships with people. Primary and secondary socialization processes overlap in time but not in function. These photos are of Plott hound crosses at the Central Animal Facility at the University of Guelph.*

never relate to people, can never take training, and are in a real sense, wild dogs.

I say partial social relationship because the number of social relationships that exist between dogs and people is limited. Only leader-follower and dominance-subordination relationships exist in normal dog-people interactions. Out of necessity, because we keep them confined or controlled (at least we should), we also have a sort of care-dependency relationship. Therefore by stretching the definition of socialization, but not too far out of shape, we can call this *secondary socialization* because the dog does form at least some social relationships with people and the process does happen only during a short period early in the animal's life.

This secondary socialization only happens with domesticated animals, and not all of them, either. Dogs are far and away the best at it. Dogs can form at least some social relationships with a second species—humans. However, sexual, mother-young, true care-dependency and agonistic relationships will not normally occur. An agonistic relationship includes aggression, submission and all the signals involved in conflict situations in dogs. People just are not built right to give proper dog signals, Little Red Riding Hood's granny notwithstanding. For example, dogs cringe with ears back, tail between the legs and eyes averted to signal surrender. A person surrenders by putting his hands up, palms toward the dominant individual. Try this to convince an uptight pit bull that you really don't want to fight any more as he is shredding your pants and what's under them. He doesn't know "hands up" from "sic 'em."

No matter how much dog-people socialization takes place, dogs do not know people language except what they have acquired through associative learning. And people must learn their dog the same way. The communication systems are species-specific.

Bonding is a relatively new bit of jargon, the newest of the buzzwords used to explain how a social relationship is cemented or solidified. The



*Irish setter and Fousek socializing. From the body language (posturing) both dogs obviously had adequate primary socialization or they would not understand the signals. Five aspects of the setter's posture say "I'm submissive."*



*One of more than a hundred dog walkers (most are volunteers) at the Central Animal Facility having a socializing walk—getting to be friends. The socializing pair can become a bonded pair if done repeatedly and frequently. Socializing would not be possible without proper secondary socialization.*

term bonding was used to describe people relationships. It's very popular to engage in some father-son bonding, or to watch the Bears or the Bulls with some of the guys on a Sunday afternoon with lots of beer and ordered-in pizza for a bit of male bonding. But more recently the term has been expanded to people-animal bonding, an interspecific type of bonding.

Books have been written on it, seminars held on it, whole conferences dedicated to it, but there still isn't a very well stabilized definition of bonding. So let's add to the confusion by trying to formulate one. Let's say bonding is increasing the strength of a social relationship by frequent and high quality association between animals. For us this means between dogs and people.

While primary socialization is dog on all dogs and secondary socialization is dog on all people, intraspecific bonding is dog with dog and interspecific bonding is dog with person. Bonding is one with one. Socialization is an *on*, dog on dogs, dog on people, while bonding is a *with*, dog with dog, dog with people.

Bonding can occur only *after* the socialization processes are complete, and then any time from the end of socialization throughout the life of dog or person or any animal. Intraspecific bonding in dogs results in two, usually, or occasionally three (rarely more) inseparable buddies. One can be dominant or one can be a leader but this is not necessary in a bonded pair. It differs from a pack structure in that both dominance and leadership are necessary in a pack where everyone has a station in life and dominance and leadership keep it that way.

Bonding between a dog and a person is accomplished by quiet, quality time together, man and dog, boy and dog, woman and dog, girl and dog. Bonding doesn't recognize gender. The dog simply prefers the person with whom he is bonded no matter what the gender. Bonding is the formation of a close friendship, a type of real buddy-buddy relationship. Use of words like friendship and buddy might sound anthropomorphic and they are, but so is the use of the word bonding because it was first used as a people term. If bonding explains an interspecific social relationship which

differs only slightly from the intraspecific one, then using people terminology is the best we have because we can understand it and relate to it.

Bonding occurs because of two individuals spending quiet, quality time together, but this doesn't tell much of how it is actually accomplished. Petting and praise can play a role, but excessive petting or praise can be counterproductive in that it can lead to the Petted dominating the Petter. Just sitting together, leaning toward or even on each other is quality time. Lying down with the dog and both taking a nap has positive bonding effects. Daily walks, especially on leash or otherwise under control is good for bonding. Bonding is always a reciprocal relationship with mutual benefit for dog and person. Bonding is devoid of any show of dominance or leadership. It is a relationship in which cost is equal and minimal for both participants and benefit is equal and maximal for both.

But what good is bonding and what function does it serve? It tells the participants what the tolerable limits are in a non-confrontational way, who can get away with what, and how to cooperate as a team, and perhaps most important, it is an expression of trust. It says, "I know you wouldn't lie to me." Bonding serves to strengthen social attachments. The attachment to people in a general way that occurs in secondary socialization is personalized by bonding. To both interactants, the other becomes special. Signals between bonded individuals are better understood by both participants, and the signals can be more subtle.

To say a dog bonds with only one person is misleading. A dog can and does bond with all or most members of the family—his family. However, this is done in a hierarchical manner. He doesn't bond with all members equally. Usually one is the favored, another is second, another third, and maybe one not at all. The bonding is not necessarily strongest with the one who takes the dog hunting, or the primary trainer, or the one who does most of the feeding. Usually this is all the same person and usually this will be the one with the strongest bond. But usually, the one who spends the most quality time with the dog is at the top of the bond pile. The emphasis here is on quality time, not just time.

In most dogs as with most people, bonding is transient. We do hear of cases where a dog simply wastes away if his master dies. But more often, within a week or two the dog will bond with a new person if the previous one dies or if the dog goes to a new owner. Socialization lasts for life but with bonding it's a case

of, if I'm not near the one I love, I love the one I'm near. We see this transient nature of bonding if we board a dog or have someone dog-sit for a few weeks. Off feed for five or six days and mopey, then normal toward the new person as the dog rebounds like nothing ever went before. This reverses quickly when the primary bond person returns.

The term socializing should not be taken as the verb form of the noun socialization. It is incorrect to say you are "socializing" a dog. Socializing in dogs means the same thing as it means in people. Two or more dogs doing almost anything together, engaged in any social activity, are socializing. Socializing, like bonding, is a *with* rather than an *on*. Socializing is what goes on, at least in part, to create bonding. Socializing is putting to work the social skills acquired during socialization.

Socializing is an essential aspect of being a pack animal. A pack of dogs, domesticated or wild canids, is a social group. Things done as a group involve socializing in a major way. Interspecific socializing, dog with person or people, is not much different from intraspecific socializing, dog with dog(s), in that both are engaging in social interaction. Dogs and people form interspecific packs with a leader-follower relationship. They also form dominance-subordinate relationships. Both relationships are expressed as socializing, being together in a social environment.

To the dog and his relationship with other dogs and with people, socializing helps form the attachment we call bonding and so is essential for the social and mental stability of the dog. But without proper primary and secondary socialization, neither socializing nor bonding can ever occur. A dog without proper socialization can still become an acceptable member of a people-dog group through associative learning but it takes a lot of patience and a lot of time and a lot of understanding dog behavior to make him acceptable, not to mention a load of pain and suffering on both sides.

In most cases reputable breeders do the right thing by their pups. Many will cut it short by pushing the pups out of the litter too soon, but at least a modicum of primary and secondary socialization has gone on. And most buyers, if they have read a good book on what to do when getting a new pup, do manage to keep their responsibility from becoming a basket case. But in both cases they hang some buzzword on what they do with the dog because it sounds good, not necessarily because of what they actually did.

Perhaps "a rose by any other name, etc." applies here, and that's okay with me. As long as both primary and secondary socialization are allowed to proceed correctly, and socializing and bonding with the dog are adequately done, the dog has a good chance to turn out right. And I'm sure the dog couldn't care less what fancy buzzwords you use to explain it. Just be careful when telling someone else about it, as he or she might know what the words really mean. □