



# Early Socialization vs Waiting for Full Vaccination

Modified from a San Francisco Chronicle Pet Tales article by Sophia Yin, D.V.M.

**Q)** I will soon be the owner of a lovely standard poodle female and am confused by the suggestions to socialize her to other humans, social situations, and dogs, versus the recommendation to keep her away from parks and other dogs until she's fully vaccinated at 16 weeks of age. What do I really have to look out for regarding exposure to disease while getting her out and about?  
Jerry

**A)** The case of vaccines versus socializations may seem confusing at first, but it turns out that both recommendations are right and once you know the reasoning behind, you can better assess the relative risks.

Vaccinations and a controlled environment are essential to a puppy's surviving past puppyhood. Armed with only a diminutive immune defense, one good microbial assault can wipe her out faster than a sand castle at high tide. This literally means that some puppies can go from dancing playfully to dead within 24-48 hours.

But given that not all puppies, especially those in developing countries, are vaccinated, why are many of these very young pups still walking around? Because puppies drink their mothers milk which is loaded with protective antibodies. During the first half-day of life, these protectants slip through the intestinal tract into the blood where they

patrol the entire body for invading microorganisms. Those pups that miss this early mother's milk are easy targets for millions of petite predators that get into their blood. And those pups that don't continue getting milk through their first weeks are more likely to break out with infectious intestinal problems too due to lack of antibodies coating the intestinal walls.

Of course the pup's immune system doesn't stay wimpy forever. With gradual exposure to small amounts of foreign invaders, it builds its strength, flexing and pumping until it's a microbe-fighting machine. We can help the process along by administering vaccines, which contain common killed viruses or modified disarmed live ones. These vaccines give the system practice recognizing and responding to the real thing.

Usually it takes several vaccine exposures to get the full effect. So why do veterinarians recommend a series of three or four? Because the mother's antibodies block the vaccine before the pup's immune system can take a look. As the puppy grows older the maternal antibodies in the blood dwindle allowing vaccines to start taking effect. The problem is that each pup's immune system and initial intake of antibodies is a little different. So we don't know exactly how fast the mother's antibodies will dissipate and how soon the pup's immune system will kick in. We do

know that before 6 weeks the puppy system is not really ready. And by 14-16 weeks the mom's antibodies are practically gone and the pup's system responding at close to full speed. Consequently we vaccinate every 3-4 weeks starting at 6-8 weeks of age and continuing through at least 16 weeks of age or longer in certain breeds. Dogs in developing countries where vaccination is rare, suffer from infectious outbreaks and high death tolls.

Veterinarians also recommend keeping puppies away from potential high risk sources of infection but not completely sequestered. Pups still need to get out and about because this early period is a sensitive time for socialization to both people and other pups. During the early weeks, puppies learn how to bond with and behave appropriately around other puppies. They also learn to socialize to people and other animals. Puppies (and kittens) who lack human handling start becoming fearful of humans by 5 weeks of age and if this lack of care continues, by 14 weeks of age they can be as fearful as wild animals. Additionally, those who don't have a chance to socialize with littermates when very young often become fearful and aggressive to dogs later in life due to lack of exposure and lack of social skills.

This means that breeders must ensure that their puppies (and kittens) are handled by different people on a daily basis and that these youngsters stay

together as a litter for at least 7-8 weeks of life and sometimes up to 12 weeks depending on the new owner's ability to continue the plan. Once the youngster goes to a home, the new owners must continue a strict socialization regimen. This includes the pup meeting several unfamiliar people of different genders, ethnicities, and sizes per week and also occasionally seeing and interacting with other dogs. For human contact this can be as simple as stopping during walks to let passersby greet your pup and perhaps give a treat—preferably while the pup is sitting (see “say please by sitting,” or at least standing calmly with all four feet on the floor). Greeting unfamiliar dogs is more complicated. Unvaccinated dogs and places where the dogs of unknown vaccine status poop are unsafe. So avoid dog parks and other high-density dog sites.

Instead, invite play buddies involving well-behaved, fully vaccinated dogs. Also once your pup has started vaccinations, take her to puppy class with supervised play and handling sessions with other vaccinated pups. Once she's fully vaccinated you can then introduce her to more dogs and new people with less worry about infectious disease. Remember there's always a risk of infection and these signs show up early, but the risks of ongoing poor socialization can be equally damaging leading to severe fear and aggression and consequently euthanasia down the road.