



Guide Dogs for the Blind

Puppy Socialization

Reference Documents:

- [Puppies with Sensitive Temperaments](#) (formerly titled “Raising Softer Puppies”)
- [Food Rewards for Countering Distraction](#) (formerly titled “Food Protocol for Distractions”)
- [Building a Confident Puppy with R+](#)
- [Chart: Steps to a Well-Socialized Puppy](#)

Taking the puppy out into the world is one of the most enjoyable parts of being a puppy raiser. If the puppy is to eventually guide a person with a visual impairment, it must be capable of going anywhere without fear or hesitation. Proper socialization is a key part of puppy raising; however it must be accomplished thoughtfully and positively. It may be detrimental to a puppy’s development to expose it to scenarios it is not ready for. Although socialization is more limited for puppies until one week after their 16-week shots, younger puppies should still be socialized. The time between 8 and 16 weeks of age is critical to the development of a puppy. Raisers should introduce the puppy to many types of people, places and things, following the [Steps to a Well-Socialized Puppy](#). Some outings may be too overwhelming for a young or sensitive puppy. If raisers are unsure about the suitability of an outing the leader should be contacted.

Public Access

State laws vary regarding granting public access to guide dog puppies. Regardless of state law, and in accordance with Guide Dogs for the Blind policy, GDB puppies may only have access to public or private places where they are granted willing admittance or inclusion by the proprietor.

Guide Dogs will not lobby or otherwise attempt to achieve access for puppies in any setting where the puppies are not welcome. Raisers and leaders may not demand, coerce, lobby, argue, litigate or otherwise attempt to force issues of access for Guide Dog puppies.

Safety Considerations During Socialization

- Puppies should not be walked into the vet's office or relieve outside the vet's office until after the completion of the vaccination series. Puppies should be carried in and held on the lap in the waiting room.
- Keeping the puppy safe from exposure to dog diseases is very important with puppies under 17 weeks of age. Even though a place may be listed as “OK” on the [Steps to a Well-Socialized Puppy](#), consideration should always be given to the amount of dog traffic and possible transmission of disease.
- During summer heat it is best to socialize the puppy early in the morning and later in the evening. During hot weather, a puppy’s footpads can be burned by very hot pavement. Puppies can overheat and dehydrate quickly. Cool water should be offered frequently to the puppy. Early signs of heat stress may include lethargy, excessive panting, anxious behavior and a bright red tongue. Should a puppy become overheated, a cool water soak will reduce its body temperature.
- In a parked car, temperatures can rise to dangerous levels within a few minutes. Puppies should never be left alone in a car.
- In icy conditions raisers should be aware of surfaces that may have been treated with chemical deicers. These substances can cause intense irritation to dogs’ feet.
- When taking the puppy to friends’ and relatives’ homes raisers should be familiar with the pets in the household and protect the puppy from negative experiences. If in doubt, the pets should be confined away from the puppy during the visit.

Puppy Jacket Guidelines

Guide Dogs for the Blind provides the leader of each group with puppy jackets in a variety of sizes. We want the puppy to wear its jacket whenever it is in public and especially if it is in a place where puppies are not normally allowed. Club leaders will provide raisers with puppy jackets when the puppy is ready to be socialized in public; age upon receiving the jacket may vary depending on the puppy's temperament.

- The jacket provides a visual explanation to the public as to why the puppy is in an area where dogs may not normally be allowed.
- Only GDB program puppies are allowed to wear a puppy jacket.
- Raisers should remove the puppy jacket before giving a cue to the puppy to relieve. If the puppy does start to relieve while wearing its jacket, it should be ignored and the raiser resolve to be more aware of the puppy's schedule to prevent future accidents.

The Puppy in the Community

- The raiser should not allow the puppy to be petted by members of the public unless the raiser has control of the puppy and the puppy can remain calm. Raisers should use food rewards to reinforce calm behavior and utilize the [Emergency Lure](#) technique if the puppy becomes too stimulated and needs to be removed from the situation.
- Allowing the puppy to become over-stimulated during greetings sets the puppy up for poor greeting behavior and solicitous behavior.
- The raiser should politely explain to visitors and members of the community that the puppy is being trained to be a guide dog. Many people are aware of the rules surrounding service dogs and are respectful. Should individuals still insist on greeting the puppy, the raiser should take the opportunity to educate in a cheerful tone as they work with the puppy to keep it engaged with its handler with the use of food.
- Often, letting someone pet the pup's rear, while the raiser gives food rewards at a high rate of reinforcement, will allow the member of the public to touch the puppy while the pup's focus remains on its handler.
- The raiser should try to keep encounters with the general public positive for everyone.

First Outings

- Follow the [Steps to a Well-Socialized Puppy](#). Remember each puppy develops at a different rate and leaders can offer advice as to the readiness of the puppy for outings
- Raisers should take the young puppy to places where it can receive positive socialization experiences. Outings should be dedicated to puppy socialization and not, for example, shopping trips where the pup is just taken along; the raiser needs to focus on the puppy.
- If it is necessary to stop at a business with a young pup, one family member should be the handler and stay with the pup, either at the store entrance or in the vehicle if the area is too busy.
- Raisers should use the "quick in and out" method of socializing new or young puppies: The raiser and puppy walk into a building, stop a few paces inside the door, the puppy has a look around and then the team exits. The visit is brief to avoid relieving accidents and over-stimulating the puppy. This is a good opportunity for the raiser to use food as reinforcement for calm behavior and loose leash walking.
- As the puppy gets a little older, the raiser can progress to sitting on a bench inside a mall or in a quiet outside area away from heavy traffic. This gives the puppy plenty of time to see the environment. Once again food rewards should be utilized to reinforce calm behavior.
- Young puppies (below 17 weeks of age) should not be taken to areas with high dog traffic. Places that have high dog traffic may include outdoor shopping centers where the public brings pet dogs, public parks, rest areas, pet stores, grooming shops, school playgrounds etc.

General Tips for Socializing

- It is highly recommended that all raisers review the document "Puppies with Sensitive Temperaments" for tips on how to recognize stress in a puppy – any puppy can become overwhelmed during socialization
- Raisers should provide step-by-step experiences that are age and development appropriate
- Novel objects should be introduced from a distance at first and the pup rewarded for calm behavior
- If possible, raisers should select single stimulus experiences when introducing something new. E.g. the vacuum cleaner:
 - let the puppy see and investigate the turned off vacuum first

- when the pup is comfortable keep the vacuum stationary but turn it on with the pup at a distance
- once the puppy accepts the noise turn the vacuum off again but move it a little
- once the pup is comfortable with the movement turn the vacuum on again
- sensitive puppies may take several days of gradual exposure to become comfortable
- Raisers should be calm and not hurried when socializing the puppy. The pup should be allowed to spend time looking at things.
- Puppies should not be forced toward objects or into situations. Sometimes the raiser touching the object and speaking in a happy tone will give the puppy confidence
- Food should not be used to lure the pup toward an object. The pup may be verbally encouraged to approach as far as it is comfortable then rewarded with food.

For more detailed instructions on working with puppies that lack confidence see the documents “Puppies with Sensitive Temperaments” and “Building a Confident Puppy with R+”

Teaching the Puppy to be Comfortable on Surfaces

The goal is to teach the puppy to walk on new or different surfaces in a relaxed and confident manner, maintaining a normal or slower pace. “Rushing” over surfaces generally indicates anxiety in the puppy. Surfaces that the puppy should experience include stairs, slick floors, grates, manhole covers etc. Some grates are too uncomfortable for a puppy to navigate; raisers should use common sense when asking a puppy to negotiate a novel surface.

Introducing New Surfaces

- Raisers should slow down when approaching the new surface.
- The puppy should be allowed to look at, sniff, and investigate the new surface.
- The raiser should verbally praise the pup for stepping onto the surface.
- Puppies may be marked and rewarded for approaching toward and stepping onto new surfaces. Giving several more rewards for standing on the surface will increase the pup’s comfort with the surface. The frequency of rewards will decrease as the puppy becomes familiar with the surface.
- A mentor dog may help give confidence to a pup that is timid of new surfaces
- At meetings, practice on surfaces may include an x-pen laid out on the ground covered by towels or blankets which are gradually pulled back until the puppy is walking across the x-pen (simulates a grate).

Introducing the Puppy to Stairs

- Going up: The puppy should be started at the top of the stairs with its front feet on the landing and its back feet on the first step below the landing. The pup may need to be carried up to the top step to start this procedure.
- Going down: The puppy should be placed at the bottom with its front feet on the ground and its back feet on the first step above the ground. It may need to be carried down to the bottom step to start this procedure.
- The puppy should be encouraged to take the one step onto the landing or onto the ground.
- The puppy should be praised.
- The puppy should be moved further up or down the steps as it becomes more confident.
- Puppies may be marked and rewarded for stepping up and down stairs. The reward should be given on the stairs. The frequency of rewards will decrease as the puppy becomes familiar with the surface.
- Puppies that tend to rush stairs should be paused and rewarded frequently for being on the stairs. Puppies need to develop a calm, steady pace on stairs.

Teaching the Puppy to Be Confident Around Traffic

As in all types of socialization, exposure to traffic should be done slowly and systematically. A hurried, premature exposure to heavy traffic can develop insecure reactions in the puppy that could affect its ability to be a successful guide. The following guidelines will help in teaching the puppy to be confident around traffic:

- The puppy should be exposed at a distance far enough from the traffic to maintain confidence.
- First exposures should be to a low-traffic street in a residential area.
- Only after the puppy is totally comfortable at the first level should the puppy be exposed to streets with higher traffic levels

- The raiser sitting on a bench allowing the puppy to just observe the traffic will develop the pup's confidence. The use of food to reinforce calm behavior will help make this a positive experience.
- Once the puppy is comfortable around traffic while the raiser is stationary, walking in the vicinity of traffic should be practiced with lots of food rewards for loose leash walking.
- It is advisable that the team face oncoming traffic when first introducing walking, with the handler placed between traffic and the puppy.

If the puppy continues to be stressed or fearful around traffic the raiser should contact their leader/CFR for advice.

Teaching the Puppy to Ride Calmly in Vehicles

Review the "Travel Policy for GDB Puppies" in particular the section "Transporting Guide Dog Puppies in Vehicles."

Puppies should be acclimated to riding in vehicles step-by-step. Transportation home from the GDB kennel is an unavoidable necessity; if the puppy seems stressed or becomes car sick it is even more important that future introductions are careful and a positive experience. To lessen the chance of the puppy becoming motion sick in its first experiences of car riding, it is suggested that keeping the vehicle quite cool helps. Also, not allowing the puppy to see out of the vehicle may help prevent carsickness. Sometimes it takes experimenting with the puppy riding in different areas in the vehicle e.g. front vs rear, in a crate or out, to find the best spot for a nauseous puppy. The puppy should not be fed a meal right before a car trip.

During introductions to car riding, should the raiser notice any of the signs below they should contact their leader/CFR for instructions on how to proceed:

- Reluctance to approach or enter the vehicle
- Reluctance to exit the vehicle
- Stress panting
- Drooling
- Vomiting
- Vocalizing
- Inability to settle
- Attempts to hide in the vehicle or crate

Introduction to Car Riding

- The puppy's first introduction to the car should be with the engine turned off. The puppy may be lifted into the car, placed where it will be expected to ride (see Travel Policy – Transporting GDB Puppies in Vehicles) and rewarded with food for calm behavior. Several such exposures before turning the engine on will create a positive association for the puppy.
- If the vehicle is low enough, the pup can be gently assisted to climb into the vehicle and rewarded inside the vehicle.
- Once the pup is comfortable in the vehicle, the engine may be turned on and the puppy rewarded for calm behavior. No marking is necessary. (See document "Rewarding Calm Behavior".)
- First drives should be brief – around the block is sufficient.
- If the puppy seems comfortable, short trips with positive destinations can be added - a ten-minute drive to a friend's house for example.
- If a crate is not being used, having a passenger to assist on the first few trips would be beneficial.
- Puppies may be concerned about approaching and loading into running vehicles. Care should be taken to protect the pup from exhaust fumes. Turning the engine off may be necessary until the puppy has more experience loading into a vehicle with the engine off and around traffic in general.
- As the puppy grows, it should be exposed to riding in different vehicles and in different locations within vehicles.
- Puppies must have experience riding crated in vehicles before returning to campus. Should the raiser not have room for a crate in their own vehicle, trading the puppy frequently to other raisers, who have the option of using a crate, would be beneficial.

Public Transportation

- Puppies over seventeen weeks may be introduced to public transportation. The leader should be consulted as to when the puppy is developmentally ready for such exposure. Some softer-tempered puppies may not be ready to ride public transport until they are eight to ten months old
- First introduction to buses, MAX, BART etc. should simply be a visit to the station, with good distance kept between the puppy and the vehicles. A mentor dog would be of huge benefit for more sensitive puppies.
- Once the puppy is comfortable in the presence of buses coming and going, it may be allowed to board a stationary bus, preferably with the engine turned off. A quick on and off, with lots of praise and food rewards would be sufficient initially.
- The puppy's first ride should be short and chosen for a smooth route with few starts and stops. Plans should be made as to how to get home/to the destination should the puppy become stressed and need to be removed from the vehicle.
- The leader and/or CFR should be consulted if the puppy shows signs of stress or nervousness riding public transportation.

Policy Regarding Puppies in Strollers, Shopping Carts and Other Carriers

GDB does not allow puppies to be placed in strollers, shopping carts, wagons, bike carriers or carry packs for the following reasons:

- Such devices encourage raisers to take puppies out too early into unsuitable environments
- Carrying a puppy into a situation gives the puppy more support and limits the duration of the exposure
- The raiser can more accurately read the puppy's comfort level when it is on a leash rather than confined in a stroller
- More benefit is attained with the "quick in and out" method of socialization than rolling or being carried through an area.
- Early socialization is limited by house breaking /vaccination policy which doubles as a gauge to age-appropriateness of an outing/environment

With the new positive puppy training methods there are so many fun games raisers can play with young puppies! We recommend raisers focus on these games and refer to the [Steps to a Well-Socialized Puppy](#) once the puppy is old enough to start going on outings.