

Meet and Greet – You're the Advocate and Coach

By Sandra Kruczek

I was in the park helping a new puppy owner get started on the path to raising the dog of her dreams. She already had a great start. She'd been reading good books on puppy raising and practicing her puppy foundation skills. Socializing her female puppy with adults and children is big on her list.

While there, two families with children approached and asked if they could pet her puppy. Hooray for parents who are teaching their children to ask permission before petting a dog! One family had a toddler. Since small children aren't quite adept with their hands, I encouraged the puppy owner to give the mom a treat to give to the child. The toddler could then toss it in front of the puppy rather than try to hand it to her. This way the child doesn't get scratched by puppy teeth and the puppy gets to see a toddler fairly close up providing a positive outcome for both.

The second family had three delightful girls. They took turns hand feeding treats to the puppy using outstretched flat up-turned palms. This way they too didn't risk getting scratched with puppy teeth. And they waited until the puppy took a treat from them before they reached to pet her.

The three girls were sitting around the puppy taking turns when one of them began to playfully rough up the irresistible furry pup while the others were feeding treats. This is just normal kid/adult behavior. However if you think about all of the input the puppy was experiencing it could overwhelm her. Learning one interaction at a time is best. When I coached the older girl about waiting a minute while the younger ones fed the pup, she understood why. These were exceptionally nice children.

One encouraging aspect of these two interactions is that it's apparent that socializing puppies to people of all ages is becoming common practice among pet owners. How that's accomplished needs a little more explanation.

In general folks are so pleased to have someone ask to pet their puppy that they allow any kind of approach from strangers. Owners need to be the advocate for the puppy and coach for the people who want to pet their puppy. If strangers just descend on the puppy it can be scary.

I encourage strangers to pet a puppy but ask them to hold off a minute while I explain why giving a treat before reaching for and touching her affords the best possible experience. In a human world, if I got right into their space without any introduction they might be afraid. Offering a yummy treat before petting gives the puppy the choice of either accepting it or not. This gives us some information concerning how puppy feels about the interaction. If puppy doesn't accept the treat, I ask the stranger to wait a moment and try again with a different approach or perhaps just not pet her.

I've found that most people are very interested in this information and are not offended if the puppy doesn't seem to want to be petted. They can relate to their own feelings or that of their children. Remember, it's more important to assess how the puppy is feeling about the interaction than how we are feeling about wanting to pet the puppy.

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