



Proactive Exposure Training

Each day, service dogs experience the world in a much different way than a pet dog. They need to be brave, confident, and unfazed by the new and different things they encounter. By working through the following checklist, you will be able to keep track of what you have exposed your puppy to as you explore the world together. Introducing your puppy to the items on the list will help them learn that new people, different sounds and textures, and being handled are no big deal!

How to Introduce New Experiences, People and Things

“Short and Sweet” is the best way to condition your puppy to new things. Always give your dog the choice to walk away from something if they are cautious or fearful. Pair these experiences with things your dog likes – toys, food, and attention!

Introducing Sounds – Use the internet to find examples of sounds that you cannot re-create naturally. Start playing new sounds at a low volume while the puppy is distracted by an activity they enjoy. This can be eating, playing, napping, or cuddle sessions. Once the puppy becomes habituated to the sound, slowly raise the volume. You can also separate the puppy from the source of a sound for the first exposure. For example, turning the hair dryer on behind a closed door.

Sometimes, sounds will happen naturally that you are not prepared for. Having treats available will help make a loud sound less scary. If a sound startles your puppy, a happy tone of voice and a few treats will help them return to a positive emotional state. Be careful not to coddle your puppy. A “Did you hear that? Good girl!” followed by a few treats should be effective enough to move on from the situation.

If a sound startles your puppy to the point that the puppy cannot recover, notify the Puppy Program Staff immediately.

Introducing Items/People – Always manage a puppy’s distance from the item or person to make sure they stay comfortable and relaxed. Start with giving them treats just for looking at the new person or thing, then give them treats for getting closer or interacting with it. Bombarding them with too much interaction too fast can cause a negative association.

Listen to your puppy! If they are nervous, create enough distance from the item or person that the puppy remains relaxed and curious, provide treats, and then end the interaction.



Tracking Your Puppy's Progress

Each item has 3 exposure opportunities to grade, and you can use the checklist to determine how your puppy is progressing. There is also a "Notes" area to assist with remembering your puppy's reaction. In each box, use this simple scale:

+	Puppy reacted positively, remained calm and relaxed, approached, and engaged with no hesitation.
+/-	Puppy hesitated at first, but approached after handler provided verbal or physical praise and support.
-	Puppy demonstrated hesitation or fear. Did not approach or showed residual anxiety after interaction.

Important Considerations

Try not to rely on obedience during these exposure activities. Asking a puppy to "sit" or "stay" in the face of a new experience can cause conflict – a scared puppy may not know whether to listen to a cue or run away and can cause an incorrect representation of how the puppy is feeling. Allowing the puppy to approach or retreat from an item will help you understand their true level of comfort.

Try your hardest to have the 2nd and 3rd exposures of each item be "natural." This means that the puppy will be exposed to the item in a setting that is outside of their normal routine or the person is they are being exposed to is not someone they interact with daily.

Allow family members other than the primary handler to assist with socialization.

If your puppy is making progress, create a goal for yourself to expose them to one or two new situations per week. This could be a novel sound, a new location, a familiar location at a different time of day, riding in a different spot in the car (other than **on** the front seat), or a novel object.

If your puppy is having a difficult time or seems to be more fearful than you would expect, that's okay. The puppy is always right, even if there is seemingly nothing to be afraid of. "Going back to Zero" – making sure your puppy has a positive experience with a new situation – will help create a confident puppy who can handle more difficult situations in the future. Although it can be tedious or frustrating, "Going back to Zero" as many times as necessary will help build trust between you and your puppy, increase the puppy's confidence, and prevent the puppy from becoming overwhelmed in a situation that they are not ready for.