



Intensity and Thresholds in Socialization

We want to introduce what might be new terms to you: *intensity* and *threshold*. Many people tend to focus their efforts on a couple of *things* (people and dogs) and *locations* (big box hardware stores, restaurants) when socializing their puppies and dogs. What's good about that is that they are aware of the need to expose their puppies to the world. At the same time, we know that [socialization is more than just exposure. It is the process of creating positive associations with new things](#). To create those positive associations, you must do the exposures gradually! The critical information that will help you do that is understanding the *intensity* of things and locations.

Intensity

What do we mean by intensity? Let's start with the definition of intense.

"Intense: having or showing a characteristic in extreme degree"

"Intense." *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intense>. Accessed 28 Sep. 2021.*

"In extreme degree" is a great way to think of intensity. It's important to recognize that people, things, environments, even other animals have intensity. And, as we introduce our puppies and dogs to new things, we want to start with low-intensity things and gradually increase the intensity as the puppy or dog shows us he's comfortable with the current intensity.

What Does that Mean Practically?

Increasing distance from something generally reduces intensity. Still things are generally less intense (extreme) than moving things. Fewer things (one child) are generally less intense/extreme than more of them (children at a birthday party). Being outside is generally less intense than being in a confined space. Restaurants and cafes are generally less intense during off-times than at mealtimes.

Think of finding the least extreme version of an environment or thing: that's where you start.

Things that can impact intensity can include:

- **time of day:** a coffee shop will likely be more intense at 8 am than at 2 pm
- **distance:** generally speaking, objects, people, or things that are farther away are less intense
- **sound:** vocalizing people and animals are generally more intense than quiet ones; noisy toys and objects are generally more intense than quiet ones
- **movement and how many:** still things (child sitting in a chair) are typically less intense than moving things (child running or dancing); fewer of a thing (one duck) are generally less intense than many things (a flock of ducks)
- **predictability:** things that appear in a predictable place (like people walking on a path in front of you) are generally less intense than things that appear unpredictably (like people suddenly appearing coming from around a corner in a big box store or restaurant)

Big Box Stores – Not the Place to Start

Can you see why taking your new 8-week-old puppy to a big box store or a restaurant could be a huge mistake? First, you have no idea how your new puppy feels about new people, strange new moving things (shopping carts), perhaps holiday decorations, loudspeakers, people carrying things? Those environments are often very, very intense and extreme. There is often not just one moving thing, like a shopping cart, there are many of them. Not one person—many.

When your puppy is young, you haven't even learned if he's confident and curious or somewhat timid and afraid. Did his breeder or foster family introduce a lot of new things or was he raised in isolation in a barn or kennel? Were his parents confident or fearful? Does he recover quickly if scared or startled or does it take him several hours to recover? All of those things can play a role in whether your puppy welcomes new experiences or is afraid of them. As we explain in our book, [*Puppy Socialization: What It Is and How to Do It*](#), puppies are definitely not blank slates. Some things come pre-programmed. Sometimes things we like are pre-programmed and sometimes things we don't expect are (like fear).

A General Plan for Managing Intensity



When I (Marge) go out with clients with new puppies, I start in a quiet location, typically a park with paved areas (walking paths and pavilions). I arrive before the owner and the puppy arrive. I set out a few novel items (new to the puppy). The items vary but are typically a food-dispensing toy with moving parts, an unstable surface like an inflatable disc, and perhaps a platform and a couple of toys.

I observe the puppy when he gets out of the car in a new location. What does his body

language look like? Is he exploring the environment or standing still with his tail tucked? When he sees me, does he approach and seek interaction? Or does he ignore me? When he gets to the novel items, does he investigate them on his own? Is his weight shifted forward or back? I get a lot of information in those first few minutes of meeting the puppy.

If the puppy displays body language of fear and avoidance, what people often refer to as “shy,” “timid,” or even “polite” (such as the puppy sitting back and waiting), I am not going to expose the puppy to more intense locations or things. Because if he’s not relaxed and having fun in a quiet location with a few new things, he’s likely going to be overwhelmed in a busier location with more people, dogs, and activity. And if that happens, instead of socializing the puppy, we could be sensitizing him, which means making him more afraid.

One Puppy’s Experience with Intensity

Let’s see what starting in a low-intensity area of a new environment looked like for one puppy. Mason was a confident puppy and his owners did a wonderful job helping him form positive associations with new things. They also used positive reinforcement training, which helps! We started at an outdoor shopping center at 8 am. There was a large parking lot behind the stores and we started in the farthest corner. Then we asked the puppy some questions. 1. Can you take food? 2. Can you play? When the answer to both of those was yes, we asked for some simple behaviors that Mason already learned. Mason did well in this quiet area of the parking lot, so we moved to a courtyard. He continued to do well, so we walked towards and passed the coffee shop. If at any point Mason’s body language had changed, we would have gone back to an area where he was more relaxed.

Click on the image to watch Mason

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It's important to remember that every puppy is an individual. His genetics and prior experiences (what he was exposed to at the breeders or foster family) will impact how he interacts with the world. So, when we talk about intensity in a general way, we are talking about *most* puppies. You might learn that your puppy, because of his genetics and prior experiences, finds something that is generally more intense to be no big deal. He might sail through all levels of intensity. That's wonderful! Still, as a rule, it's better to start with low intensity and build from there, based on the puppy's responses.

Intensity Hierarchies Will Vary by Puppy

Here are some sample lists of things from lower intensity to more intense or extreme versions, at home and away. This is just a guideline. What one puppy finds intense another might not. A particular puppy might be worried about stepping on a cookie sheet pan, even though that's listed on the lower intensity end of the scale. That's why it's best to start slow and build intensity over time.

At Home

- a piece of cardboard
- a seat cushion or pillow
- a cookie sheet pan
- a small waste can
- a closed umbrella
- a skateboard turned upside down
- a quiet children's toy
- a child walking
- an unstable surface, like a balance disc
- a musical or noise-making children's toy
- an open umbrella
- a child running
- an umbrella going from closed to open

Away from Home

- a friend's house
- a quiet park
- a still swing
- a moving swing
- the parking lot of an outdoor shopping mall at 8:30 am

- the sidewalk of an outdoor shopping mall at 8:30 am
- an outdoor cafe during an “off” time
- a sidewalk across the street from an elementary school during recess
- the parking lot of a hardware store at 10 am
- a bench on a sidewalk outside a nursing home or senior center during the day

Look for Low-Intensity Areas to Start

The following photos show different areas in the same park. I usually start puppies and dogs with most of the activity in front of them. As the puppy progresses, we might walk along the lower path, or move between the paths and work our way up towards the playground. It is important to remember that what is low intensity to one puppy might be medium or high intensity to another. That’s why it’s important to start in low-intensity areas. You don’t want to overwhelm your puppy.



Remember to assess your dog or puppy’s body language each time you take him out. And make sure he’s forming positive associations. Have fun teaching your puppy about the world.

What is Threshold and What Does That Have to Do with Intensity?

Trainers often talk about keeping dogs under “threshold.” What does that mean exactly? Let’s go back to Merriam-Webster.

“The point at which a physiological or psychological effect begins to be produced.”

“Threshold.” Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/threshold>. Accessed 2 Oct. 2021.

That’s a good definition and in keeping with how dog people often refer to threshold. Since it’s a general term, there are thresholds for lots of different things and experiences. But for dogs that bark and lunge at other dogs or people, what we mean when we talk about keeping the dog

“under threshold, ” is to stay below the point where he is physically reacting or overly stressed. This term is also relevant for dogs or puppies who get over-excited or too stimulated by the environment. We want to choose an environment or practice set-up that is low enough intensity to keep the dog from crossing the threshold between being able to learn and being over-stimulated, worried, or reacting to his surroundings.

Intensity and Threshold Go Together

If you have a puppy or older dog who worries about new environments or things in the environment (novelty, people, children, other dogs), it is extremely important to know how to arrange the environment for success. We don't want dogs and puppies rehearsing behaviors that we are trying to extinguish. We choose the environments and props so the dog or puppy can be successful. This means keeping the intensity low enough to keep him under threshold.

How Do You Know If You Chose Wisely?

We want you to remember the faces of the puppies below. They are all on socialization outings. Some are in their [sensitive period for socialization](#) and some are beyond that period. It doesn't matter because you'll need to continue these types of outings for the first year of your puppy's life. But most importantly, remember these expressions.

