



Socialisation and Habituation Guideline

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Citation:

Working Animals Federation of Australia (WAFA), "Socialisation and Habituation Guideline",
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Purpose

This Guideline outlines the minimum requirements for the socialisation and habituation of working animals, particularly those being trained or assessed as assistance animals. Proper exposure to diverse environmental, sensory, social, and situational stimuli is essential to prepare the animal for safe, reliable, and confident functioning in complex public and private environments.

Scope

This Guideline applies to all WAFA-accredited trainers, assessors, and member organisations. It is relevant during all stages of animal development and training, including early puppyhood, adolescence, and adulthood. The scope includes formal training settings, home-based training, community-based training, and public access work.

Definitions

- **Socialisation:** Exposing an animal to a wide range of people, animals, and situations to build confidence, calmness, and sociability.
- **Habituation:** Gradually and safely exposing an animal to various stimuli (e.g., noise, movement, surfaces) so that these no longer provoke fear, anxiety, or overreaction.

Socialisation and Habituation Task Categories

These task categories represent core competencies for working animals. Not all animals will encounter every stimulus, but they must be sufficiently exposed to respond appropriately in similar or equivalent settings. Baseline experiences ensure the animal is confident, adaptable, and emotionally resilient across most public and semi-public environments.

Environments

Animals must be exposed to diverse settings, including but not limited to:

- Shopping centres, supermarkets, indoor/outdoor markets, street festivals
- Restaurants, cafés, food courts
- Airports, train stations, buses, taxis, ride shares
- Medical centres, hospitals, dental clinics
- Schools, universities, childcare centres
- Government offices (e.g., Centrelink, NDIS offices), police stations, courtrooms
- Hotels, caravan parks, shared accommodation
- Beaches, rivers, nature walks, national parks
- Live music events, sports games, cinemas
- Sensory-friendly events, libraries, post offices, banks

- Residential aged care facilities, places of worship
- Farms, livestock areas, animal-heavy settings
- Workplaces, community halls, public toilets, playgrounds, skate parks
- Escalators, lifts, travelators, stairs

Surfaces

- Tactile paving, textured mats, grates, escalators
- Lifts, tiled, wooden, rubber, metal, and wet floors
- Sand, gravel, asphalt, mud, pebbles, grass, mulch, bush terrain
- Steps and stairs, carpet, linoleum, vinyl, concrete, brick, cobblestone
- Metal grates, drain/manhole covers, wet/slippery surfaces
- Rubber/foam mats, wooden decks, pavement with cracks, snow/ice, muddy/swampy ground

Noises

- Loudspeakers, alarms, sirens, car horns
- Children yelling, babies crying, barking dogs
- Vacuum cleaners, leaf blowers, construction tools
- Thunder, fireworks, crowd noise, clapping, doorbells, phone rings
- Kitchen appliances, hair dryers, electric razors, escalators, elevators
- Traffic, public announcements, music, loud conversations
- Fire alarms, sporting event sounds, playground noise, shopping carts

Human Appearances and Behaviours

- Individuals with visible disabilities, uniforms, sunglasses, hats, face masks, costumes
- Sudden or exaggerated movements, yelling, laughing, arguing
- People stimming, having meltdowns, under influence of alcohol/drugs (if safe)
- Cultural/religious dress, unusual gait or movement, heavy bags, strollers, wheelchairs
- Children, pets, runners, crowds, street performers, buskers

Medical and Disability Contexts

- Mobility aids, medical equipment, automated doors, lifts, ramps, hospital beds
- Quiet waiting, ignoring medical procedures, hearing aids, cochlear implants

- Other assistance animals, prosthetics, emergency personnel, medical alarms

Visual and Movement Triggers

- Mirrors, reflective surfaces, rotating signs, flags, balloons
- Vehicles, shadows, flickering/flashing lights, moving crowds, sudden movements
- Drones, robots, fans, banners, animals in motion

Scent Exposure

- Cleaning chemicals, perfumes, body odour
- Food smells, animal waste, smoke, cooking smells, freshly cut grass
- Industrial/petrol fumes, scented candles/incense, garbage/recycling odors

Animals and Other Species

- Dogs of various demeanours, common household animals, small and large exotics
- Livestock, animals in cages/tanks/enclosures, multiple animals together
- Aquatic animals, transported animals, other working animals

Cultural and Religious Contexts

- Places of worship, culturally significant locations
- Exposure to customs, dietary restrictions, sacred/taboo animals
- Awareness of gestures, festivals, multicultural gatherings, language barriers

Touch and Physical Contact

- Accidental or unexpected contact (bumping, patting, handling sensitive areas)
- Grooming, wearing/adjusting equipment, physical restraint, hugging/holding

High-Stakes or Stressful Scenarios

- Public confrontation, unexpected changes, emotionally distressed people
- Emergency evacuations, loud arguments, law enforcement presence
- Medical emergencies, crowds, unfamiliar or chaotic environments
- Separation from handler, environmental hazards, media presence, legal proceedings

Role-Specific or Sector-Specific Environments

- Offices, schools, healthcare, retail, emergency services, laboratories
- Farms, theatres, prisons, hotels/kitchens, public parks, public transport hubs
- Community centres, emergency shelters

Implementation Guidelines

- Expose animals gradually and positively using non-coercive, force-free methods.
- Document and monitor all socialisation and habituation activities.
- Educate handlers on maintaining socialisation, particularly during regression or trauma.
- Plan exposures according to age and developmental stage.
- Prioritise animal welfare, safety, and consent at all times.

Enforcement and Compliance

- Socialisation and habituation requirements are embedded in WAFA training and assessment, including WAFA-Certified Training Programs and the WAFA Public Access Test (PAT).
- Trainers, assessors, and organisations must provide evidence of completed socialisation and habituation for credentialing.
- WAFA reserves the right to audit or review training logs and behaviour reports when concerns arise.

Review

This guideline will be reviewed annually or as necessary to ensure alignment with evolving industry standards, accessibility requirements, and WAFA's strategic mission.

Document Control

Version	Date	Author	Change Description	Approved By
V1.0	23/07/2025	V. Solomon	Initial	C.Williams