

What is the socialization process?

Socialization is the process by which children and adults learn from others. We begin learning from others during the early days of life; and most people continue their social learning all through life (unless some mental or physical disability slows or stops the learning process). Sometimes the learning is fun, as when we learn a new sport, art or musical technique from a friend we like. At other times, social learning is painful, as when we learn not to drive too fast by receiving a large fine for speeding.

Natural socialization occurs when infants and youngsters explore, play and discover the social world around them. Planned socialization occurs when other people take actions designed to teach or train others -- from infancy on. Natural socialization is easily seen when looking at the young of almost any mammalian species (and some birds). Planned socialization is mostly a human phenomenon; and all through history, people have been making plans for teaching or training others. Both natural and planned socialization can have good and bad features: It is wise to learn the best features of both natural and planned socialization and weave them into our lives.

Positive socialization is the type of social learning that is based on pleasurable and exciting experiences. We tend to like the people who fill our social learning processes with positive motivation, loving care, and rewarding opportunities. Negative socialization occurs when others use punishment, harsh criticisms or anger to try to "teach us a lesson;" and often we come to dislike both negative socialization and the people who impose it on us.

There are all types of mixes of positive and negative socialization; and the more positive social learning experiences we have, the happier we tend to be -- especially if we learn useful information that helps us cope well with the challenges of life. A high ratio of negative to positive socialization can make a person unhappy, defeated or pessimistic about life.. Some people will defend negative socialization, since painful training can prepare people to be ready to fight and die in battle, put themselves at great risk in order to save others, endure torture and hardship. This is true; but many people receive far more negative socialization than they need, and hopefully fewer and fewer people will need to be trained for battle, torture and hardship.]

We all have an enormous human potential, and we all could develop a large portion of it if we had the encouragement that comes from positive socialization and the wisdom that comes from valuable information about living. Information about both natural and planned socialization can be especially useful.

Our prior socialization helps explain a gigantic chunk of who we are at present -- what we think and feel, where we plan to go in life. But we are not limited by the things given to us by our prior social learning experiences; we can take all our remaining days and steer our future social learning in directions that we value. The more that we know about the socialization process, the more effective we can be in directing our future learning in the ways that will help us most.

Because we were not able to select our parents, we were not able to control much of the first 10 or 20 years of our socialization. However, most people learn to influence their own socialization as they gain experience in life. It takes special skills to steer and direct our own socialization, and many of us pick up some of those skills naturally as we go through life. Having a course on socialization can help us understand which skills are most effective in guiding our socialization toward the goals we most value. If we had too much negative socialization in the past and have learned to be too sad or inhibited, knowledge about positive socialization can help minimize some of the pain and allow us to build toward a more positive and creative future.