

PUPPY DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES

Puppies are growing animals. When they are young, they learn much and what is learned has a lasting impact. All dogs, regardless of breed, pass through various stages as they grow and develop, physically, mentally, and psychologically. Psychologists use the term critical period to describe a specific time in a dog's life when certain experiences have a lasting effect upon their psychological development. Understanding these critical periods and a dog's stages of development will better help you to understand your dog's behavior and how to handle him during these special times. Additionally, puppies benefit greatly when their owners understand their development.

This has been a cursory look at some of the behavioral changes that often occur during puppyhood, adolescence, and early adulthood. Other problems may arise at these stages which are not the result of the developmental period itself, but are caused by something in the environment or the dog's basic personality. Even so, they are probably aggravated by immaturity and you cannot afford to overlook them. Understanding, training, and perhaps professional help with training are the keys to success. All dogs are different. Some will not exhibit the behaviors we have discussed and others will pass through them at varying rates with smaller dogs maturing faster than large dogs. Remember that your dog needs you to play a role in his development and you can do that with knowledge and commitment to training.

3-6 WEEKS – TODDLER

During the Toddler period, puppies emerge on their own from the litter. They venture into the surrounding environment. This emergence from the litter is a gradual and continual learning experience. During this stage of development puppies learn basic behavioral patterns specific to dogs. While playing, they practice different body postures, learning what the postures mean and how they affect their mother and litter mates. They learn what it is like to bite and be bitten, what barking and other vocalizations mean and how to make and use them to establish social relationships with other dogs. Such learning and activity tempers their own biting and vocalizing.

From the age of five weeks, the mother teaches her puppies basic manners. They learn to be submissive to her leadership and what behaviors are acceptable. If necessary, she growls, snarls, or snaps at them as a form of discipline. When weaning the litter, for instance, the mother will discipline her puppies so that they will leave her alone. Because the mother disciplines them in a way that they clearly understand, after a few repetitions, the puppies will respond to a mere glare from her. If a pup has not learned to accept leadership (and discipline) in its early interactions with dogs, its training will be more difficult. Puppies that are removed from the nest too early tend to be nervous, more prone to barking and biting, and less responsive to discipline. Often they are aggressive with other dogs. Generally speaking, a puppy taken away from its mother and litter mates before seven weeks of age, may not realize its full potential as a dog and companion. To maximize the mental and psychological development of puppies, they must remain in the nest with their mother and litter mates until seven weeks of age.

7-12 WEEKS – RAPID LEARNING (SOCIALIZATION)

It is at this age that rapid learning occurs. At seven weeks, puppies can learn and what they learn will have a lasting impact. Everything he comes in contact with will make a lasting impression upon him as it never will again. Not only will he learn, but, he will learn whether he is taught or not. Though he has a short attention span, what things he learns are learned permanently and resistant to change. Therefore, owners need to be careful about what their puppies are learning at this time. Your puppy is very anxious to learn how you want him to behave and react, and he needs to be shown what is expected of him in his new role as your pet. There are rules you will expect your puppy to obey. Establish those rules NOW while behaviors are easy to establish. For instance, how

your pet interacts with you is determined during puppyhood. What he does now is what he will likely do later. So, don't allow your puppy to do things which will be unacceptable when he becomes a dog.

During this time, you and your puppy will also begin to know and understand each other. You will get to know about your puppy's particular temperament and personality - whether he is strong-willed or eager to please, gentle or rambunctious, shy or outgoing, and just what else makes him the endearing individual that he is. For the puppy, this is both an exciting and somewhat confusing time. There is a whole new world of things to learn about and all sorts of new experiences to digest. Remember that the environments you put your puppy in are more complex than those he would encounter naturally. Puppies must now learn a new set of rules. He needs to know how to interact with humans and other animals who live with them. Puppies must adapt to the patterns and tenor of their new homes. All of these experiences and the behaviors which accompany them, must be learned.

Because you will impose such important demands on your puppy, you must help him to make the transition into the human environment. You need to lay a groundwork for a trusting, happy mutually satisfying relationship. Keep in mind that puppies are less likely to broaden their experiences if they are insecure. In natural environments, puppies approach new things cautiously. By giving your puppy brief, repeated experiences in new situations, you give him a chance to become familiar. If you don't expose your puppy to a variety of situations and new environments, inappropriate ways to adapt may be learned.

During the socialization period, there is a fear imprint period from 8 - 11 weeks. During this time, any traumatic, painful or frightening experiences will have a more lasting impact on your pup than they would if they occurred at any other time. An unpleasant trip to the veterinarian, for instance, at this time could forever make your dog apprehensive about vets. To avoid this, take some treats and a toy with you. While you wait, play with your puppy and offer him treats. Have your vet give your puppy treats along with lots of praise and petting before and after the examination. Avoid elective surgeries, such as ear-cropping and hernia repair during this time. In general, avoid stressful situations.

Remember, dogs are social animals. To become acceptable companions, they need to interact with you, your family, and other people and dogs during the socialization period. Dogs that are denied socialization during this critical period often become unpredictable because they are fearful or aggressive. It is during this time, that your dog needs to have positive experiences with people and dogs. Therefore, you need to socialize and teach your puppy how to interact with people and other dogs in a positive, non-punitive manner. You should gradually introduce your puppy to new things, environments, and people. But care must be taken in socializing your puppy with other dogs or in areas where many "unknown" dogs frequent, prior to the time that your dog has had three of its booster vaccinations against contagious diseases.

Shopping centers, parks, and playgrounds are good places to expose him. Begin by taking your puppy when there are few distracters. Give him time to get used to new places. Make sure he is secure. If you have children that visit only occasionally, have your puppy meet children as often as you can. If you live alone, make an effort to have friends visit you, especially members of the opposite sex so that your dog will become accustomed to them. If you plan on taking your dog to dog shows or using your dog in a breeding program, get him around other dogs. If you plan to travel with your dog, get him accustomed to riding in the car. Take him for brief rides, at first. Go someplace fun. Remember, if new experiences are overwhelming or negative, the results could be traumatic.

12-16 WEEKS – SENIORITY/LEADER

It is during this critical period that your dog will begin to test you to see who the pack leader is going to be. He'll begin to bite you, in play or as a real challenge to your authority. Such behavior is natural in the pack and not necessarily undesirable. What is undesirable is an inappropriate response on your part. It is important, at this stage, that you establish your position as pack leader, and not just another sibling. Other behaviors, such as

grabbing at the leash, will be observed, and all are attempts to dominate you. Biting, in particular though, should always be discouraged.

Therefore, you should not wrestle or play tug of war. Such play is aggressive-inducing. What you see as a fun game may be perceived by your dog as a situation in which he has been allowed to dominate. Wrestling, of course, communicates to your puppy that he is allowed to bite you. Tug of war sets you up in a dominance confrontation over an object. He learns that he can keep objects away from you. During tug of war games, puppies will often growl. Growling is a dominance vocalization, designed to warn another pack member that they better not confront the growler or he will bite.

Puppies see these games as situations in which they have been allowed to dominate. They do not understand that these are games designed by humans to entertain them. You can continue to play with your dog during this period, but, the relationship between you during the play must change. No mouthing of your body should be allowed and when your dog does mouth, you should respond with a quick and sharp "No!" or "No Bite!" Play that does not get rough is best. If you cannot keep the dog from getting overly excited during a game and he persists in biting at you, don't play that way. This will only stimulate additional dominant behavior in the future. For these reasons, this is the stage when serious training should begin. Training establishes your pack leadership in a manner that your puppy will understand. By training your puppy, you will learn how to get him to respond to commands designed to show that you are in charge.

4-8 MONTHS – FLIGHT INSTINCTS

This is the age when puppies become more independent of their owners and are likely to venture off on their own. Puppies that have always come when called or stayed close to their owners will now ignore them, often running in the opposite direction. This period can last from several weeks to months.

So, how do you respond when your puppy suddenly develops the urge to bolt? First, you must, for his safety, put a leash or a long line on your dog whenever you are not in a confined area. Second, work hard on training your puppy to come on command. If your dog still continues to bolt or run away, then your dog probably does not view you as the dominant figure in this relationship and you require special help to resolve this problem. Even if your puppy appears less inclined to bolt, this does not mean that he is reliable off lead without more maturity and a lot more training.

5-18 MONTHS - ADOLESCENCE

Adolescence can appear in smaller dogs as early as five months. In larger breeds, it can start as late as nine or ten months. In giant breeds, adolescence doesn't take place until twelve to eighteen months. In general, the larger the dog, the longer it will take to physically mature. Some breeds can remain adolescents until they are two and a half, or three years old. Adolescence is expressed in male dogs by scent marking behavior. Scent marking behavior is stimulated by the release of testosterone into the dog's system. At this time, males may become macho. Male dogs may become less friendly and even somewhat aggressive to other male dogs. He may begin lifting his leg in the house. He may become very interested in girls, tend to roam, and certainly not interested in listening to you! Some males at this age become totally unruly. In females, adolescence is marked by the onset of the heat cycle, estrus. During this three week period, your bitch could become pregnant. So, keep her away from all male dogs. Bitches exhibit erratic behavior during estrus. Some get real moody and insecure. Others become quite bold or even aggressive.

Adolescence is a very difficult time for pet owners. They are surprised when their cute little puppy becomes a free and independent thinker. Adolescence is certainly a good time to start (or reinstitute) rigorous training. You

must work hard NOW to mold the dog of your dreams. This course will teach you training methods which are based on sound knowledge of dog behavior. You will gain knowledge about dog behavior and training techniques. This knowledge will help you to get through your dog's adolescence. A dog that you view as too stupid, too old or stubborn or too spiteful can become a well-mannered, enjoyable, and reliable companion.

Establish yourself as the leader of the pack. Be realistic about your expectations. You cannot expect young dogs to grow up overnight. Learn to appreciate your dog's adolescence for it is a truly wonderful time. At this time of their lives, dogs are very energetic and exuberant in their responses. They can be full of beans, but still, delightful playmates. You as the owner must learn to channel that energy and exuberance into learning, working, exercising, and playing games. It is not too late to train (or retrain) your dog to help him to become a long-lasting companion.

6-14 MONTHS – 2nd FEAR IMPRINT

The Second Fear Imprint Period is similar to the one that occurred during the socialization period, but, it is much less defined. It occurs as dogs enter adolescence and seems more common in males. It is often referred to as adolescent shyness. Your dog may suddenly become reluctant to approach something new or suddenly become afraid of something familiar. This behavior can be very frustrating to the owner and difficult to understand because its onset is so sudden and, seemingly, unprovoked. If you notice this behavior, it is important to avoid the two extremes in response: Don't force him to do or approach something frightening to him and don't coddle or baby him. To get through situations that make your dog fearful, be patient, kind, and understanding. Desensitize him to the object or situation by gradually introducing him to it and using food rewards and praise to entice him to confront the fearful object or situation. Do not coddle or reassure him in any way that will encourage his fearful behavior. Do not correct him either. Simply make light of it and encourage him give him food rewards as he begins to deal with his fear better. Make sure you lavishly praise his attempts! This phase will pass.

1-4 YEARS - ADULTHOOD

During this period your dog may again become aggressive and assertive. For instance, he may become more turf-protective, by barking when someone comes to the door. Temper his protective behaviors by teaching him how to accept strangers into your home. His friendly play with other dogs may escalate to fighting with other dogs. Teach you dog to ignore other dogs that he sees if he can't be friendly towards them. Take him to places where there will be a few dogs at first and train him there. Then, train him in areas with more and more dogs. Next, allow him to interact with non-threatening dogs. Puppies and bitches are good choices, if he is a male. Always praise his positive efforts to interact or if he displays no reaction. Gradually move onto male dogs. At bit of caution here, adult members of the same sex, no matter what animals' species, tend to compete with one another. Putting together two strange adults of the same sex could result in a fight. Watch for behavioral signs of playfulness before allowing two dogs to play together. Also, be alert to the posturing of aggressive behaviors. Watch for circling behaviors, walking on toes, stiff tail wags, and tense facial expressions.

Adulthood is also a time that your dog may again test your position as pack leader. If he does, handle him firmly, suspend any rough play that may be giving him the idea that he can dominate you, and continue with training. Additional classes or private help with training may be a wise investment. It can provide you with the structure and commitment to train him that you need at this time. Proceed with training in a matter-of-fact, no nonsense manner and your dog will become a reasonably obedient dog. Give him lots of positive attention for his efforts!

CREDIT: This section was largely contributed by Annette Neff (in 4/96), and has been training dogs for 15 years and she is currently active with Pat Behavior Associates. Annette graciously contributed this material from her puppy course notes. Other sources of information about puppy stages of development include:

Rutherford and Neil. *How To Raise a Puppy You Can Live With*, and
Monks of New Skeet. *The Art of Raising a Puppy.*