

Stages of Canine Development

Understanding your dog's past may give you some insight into their current behaviors...and knowing what's coming in their future may help you be prepared to handle it right.

Neonatal Period 0 - 13 day:

The new puppies cannot see, hear, regulate their own body temperatures, eliminate without stimulation and are totally dependent upon their mother.

No emotional development, social attachment, or learning takes place during this period. Puppies' brain waves remain constant whether sleeping or awake.

A study has shown that mildly stressing the pups during the first five weeks develops dogs that are superior in learning and competitive situations, are able to handle stress better and are more outgoing.

(Mild physical stress at any age will actually increase the size of the brain.)

Transition Period 13-21 days:

Puppies' ears and eyes will gradually open. They will begin to hear and will respond to taste and smell. This is the time to introduce novel stimuli to the whelping box.

Awareness Period - 21 to 23 DAYS:

The puppy is able to use their sense of sight and hearing.

Learning begins!

There are significant changes in brain waves during this period and pups are now able to learn from experiences and retain what they have learned.

They are fully alert to their environment and will startle easily at sudden sounds and movements. Avoid loud noises or sudden changes during this period. Negative events can permanently imprint on pups during this week. No vacume cleaners, hair dryers, etc. Social bonding begins to occur during this week.

Canine Socialization Period (3wks-7wks):

The puppy learns specific behaviors that make him a dog such as barking, chasing, biting and body postures.

Play fighting becomes increasingly intense. Pups are developing problem solving abilities, physical co-ordination and bite inhibition. Puppies require plenty of playtime with littermates, so they can socialize and develop pack hierarchy through play.

They also learn to accept discipline from mama dog and to use submissive postures to appease. Leaving the litter before 7 weeks can affect the puppy's ability to get along with other dogs later and they will likely have trouble learning to inhibit the force of their bite and except discipline from their human family.

During this time puppies will begin to move to the far corners of their bed, box, or pen to urinate

and defecate. House breaking can begin!

Occasionally isolate puppies to prepare them for separation.

Puppy's rate of mental development will now depend on the complexity of their environment.

Exposure to a variety of noises and different floor surfaces is important.

Begin positive training sessions at 5 weeks. Yes---5 weeks!

The brain waves of the puppy are the same as a mature dog, but the puppy is a clean slate.

Puppies can begin simple training routines using food lures, verbal praise & attention at this time. This is also the prime socialization period. Introduce new people, especially children. Introduce situations that will stimulate problem solving behavior - tunnels, cardboard boxes, gates, steps, fences, logs, etc. Allow pups to have successes and reinforce these successes with food.

Fear Imprint Subperiod occurs between 8 and 10 weeks:

Experiences a puppy perceives as traumatic during this time are generalized and may affect him his entire life. v

Puppies should not be shipped during this period, elective surgery should be put off until the 12th week, and necessary visits to the vet should be made fun.

Keep training short, positive & fun.

Human Socialization Period (7 wks-12 wks):

(This is when we step in and can have the greatest impact on our dogs!)



The puppy is enlarging his social awareness and bonding outside of the litter should occur. This is the best time to place a puppy in his new home.

Mental abilities are fully formed but the pups lack experience.

This is the optimum time to teach Puppy Manners and is, in fact, the period of fastest learning.

Research has shown that behaviors can be shaped and modified most easily during times when learning is occurring most quickly. Training during this time will actually increase the capacity to learn by increasing brain cells in the appropriate regions of the brain.

Bladder and bowel control is developed and pups are capable of sleeping through the night without an accident.

Note: If socialized later than 14 weeks, (or between 12 -14 weeks in some dogs) shyness or aggressiveness may dominate behavior the rest of his life.

This is thought to be the #1 reason for behavior problems...lack of exposure to people, especially kids, dogs, etc.

Just because your puppy lives with another dog or there are 2 teenagers in the house DOES NOT mean he has been socialized. It needs to be several new dogs and people per week if not per day. This definitely takes some effort--but you basically only have a couple of weeks and then the window of opportunity closes. Procrastination may lead to extremely difficult fear/aggressive behaviors later.

Seniority Classification Period (3 to 4 months):

Otherwise known as the "age of the cutting' teeth and apron strings. The pup is trying to figure out who is boss. If littermates are still together, there is intense competition.

So long as you provide structure, control and leadership, this transition should be relatively painless.

By 16 weeks of age the brain of a puppy will reach 80% of full development and his emotional makeup is fully developed and cemented for life, barring desensitization.

Do not put off training...you're literally on the clock.

Teach a great RECALL and practice it everyday!! Do this before pup enters the "flight period" at about 16 weeks.

Flight Instinct Period (4-8 months) :

Characterized by independence and wilfulness, this stage can last from a few days to several weeks and can occur anytime during this period.

Your once 'obedient' pup may not hang on your every word.

They may not play fetch even though they once did.

They may even forget "potty training" .

The pups will also be uncomfortable because their adult teeth are growing in.

Be aware these changes are coming, stay calm...and like all teenagers' behaviors--this too will pass. Thank goodness!

Note: A general persistence in behavior problems may occur during this time as well, and corrections become more difficult.

(Most of my phone calls for help come during this time.)

Second Fear Imprint period (6-14 months):

(This stage leaves owners scratching their head at their dogs' weird behaviors)

This fear period corresponds with hormonal changes & growth spurts.

To many owners' dismay, (and even with stellar socialization early on) your usually confident pup may display fearfulness of new situations, objects, people or other dogs.

Many dogs will show a rise in their level of aggression/reactivity during this time. They may become protective and territorial, and may make a new attempt to test owners.

Some individuals will pass through this period faster than others, often with no noticeable problems. Others may display marked changes in behavior in strange situations.

Reinforce the behaviors you want; do not inadvertently reinforce fearfulness by coddling, but

also avoid punishing timidity or "forcing" them to face their fears.

A firm, patient leader is always what we should strive to be in any stage of our dogs' development, but that resolve will never be put to the test more than this time in your relationship with your dog.

Postpone extremely stressful or traumatic experiences for dogs that appear to be in this fear imprint period.

Young Adulthood (18-24 months):

Many dogs will show a rise in their level of aggression during this time. They may become protective and territorial, and may make a new attempt to test owners.

Also, if you missed any socialization or exposure early on to certain things, that may start to surface as well.

Based on the work of Jack and Wendy Volhard.