

Developmental Stages of Puppy Behaviour

A puppy needs proper, appropriate and regular socialization in order to grown into a well-adjusted adult dog. This guide explains the different stages puppies go through as they grow.

0–7 Weeks

The developmental tasks of this period all involve learning appropriate social behavior with other dogs. Interactions with mother and siblings teach bite inhibition, appropriate submissive and attention-soliciting behavior, attention-receptive behavior, and general confidence with other dogs.

Orphan puppies and single-pup litters are at a disadvantage when it comes to learning how to be a dog among dogs. Some of these lessons can be learned later (though how late is too late has not been clearly determined) under carefully arranged and supervised conditions. Orphan puppies, especially those bottle-fed from a very early age without mother or siblings, make very problematic pets without knowledgeable remedial behavior shaping.

7–8 Weeks

This is the ideal time for going home. This is the very best age for forming strong bonds with people. Puppies are mentally mature enough to adjust to changes, and to begin their training in manners. Research on this critical period has even pinpointed the 49th day as the ideal day for going into a new home.

8–10 Weeks

Sometimes referred to as the "fear period," the puppy is especially impressionable now. Object-associations formed during this period leave indelible imprints. It's vital that the puppy have as many positive experiences with people, other animals, and novel situations as can be arranged.

It's equally vital to avoid painful or scary experiences until after 11 weeks. Those mildly unpleasant experiences that can't be avoided (like puppy shots) should be turned into positive ones by your reaction. Always "jolly up" a scared puppy by laughing, praising the puppy, and treating the event as a game. Never give the appropriately human empathetic response of soothing reassurance, as this convinces the puppy that it must be really awful since you're upset too.

8–16 Weeks

This is a good time to enroll in puppy training classes. They teach you how to teach your puppy how to learn. Make sure all training sessions are fun and successful. Take advantage of the puppy's dependence on you and strong desire to be near you to teach him to be reliable on "come."

Never punish a puppy, for any reason, if he has come to your call—or come to you at all! In fact, avoid trainers/training techniques which rely on punishment. Get the puppy out into the world and expose him to as many new things and different ages, sexes and races of people as possible. Always make sure you can control the situation so the experiences will be positive. Have the puppy on a leash so that you can intervene if anything threatens or frightens him.

4–6 Months

This pre-adolescent period is characterized by the gradual increase of independence and confidence. The puppy will venture further and further from you side, motivated by his own curiosity and increasing confidence in the world.

Continue training, in a class if possible. Begin incorporating distractions into your practice sessions. Take the puppy with you everywhere! This period is very important in cementing a bond strong enough to withstand the trials of adolescence (right around the corner). Make certain your puppy is [spayed or neutered](#) by six months (we spay and neuter puppies as young as eight weeks old at PAWS). There is no reason to allow the disruptive effects of sex hormones to complicate his/your life.

6–12 Months

Even with the best preparation during puppyhood, things will be "hairy" from time to time during this period. The puppy/young dog's needs for stimulation, companionship and activity are very high, and his tolerance for boredom and inactivity are low.

This is the period in which sexual maturity is reached in unaltered animals. Guardians will experience testing behaviors reminiscent of human teenagers. Avoid situations in which the dog's occasional lapses of obedience could have harmful results, such as off-leash work in an unsecured area. Continue to provide safe opportunities for vigorous play and exercise, and [safe toys](#) to occupy teeth and mind when he's confined. This is not the time to expect model behavior.

12–18 Months

Somewhere during this period, your dog will reach emotional maturity; sooner, with small breeds, and later for large dogs. At that time, dogs with tendencies toward dominance will begin to assert themselves, hoping to raise their status in the pack (your household). This behavior occurs within a structure of familiar relationships and only when the animal is approaching emotional maturity.

Living with a dominant dog does not mean that the guardian must "conquer" the dog, or give up attempts to control him. But challenges from the dog must be recognized immediately and taken seriously. Punishment is not the appropriate method of dealing with this, and is likely to provoke a dangerous response. Consult a competent [behaviorist](#) whenever the first warnings of dominance aggression manifest.