

Stages of Canine Development

Understanding a dog's developmental stages may help you understand current behaviors you're seeing in your puppy or dog, and can help you be prepared with appropriate training and behavior-shaping and modification techniques.

Neonatal Period (0-12 days)

- 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, such as placing puppy's foot on a wet washcloth for a moment, 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.

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, such as a plastic milk bottle, knotted towel, cardboard box, etc.
- This is also a time to introduce puppies to friendly cats.
- It is important to continue picking up the pups daily, cuddle them, talk to them, and spend a few minutes with each one individually.

Awareness Period (21-23 days)

- Learning begins!
- The puppy is able to use its sense of sight and hearing.
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.
- A stable environment is crucial; it is important not to overwhelm or overload puppies.
- Negative events can permanently imprint on pups during this week.
- Puppies are fully alert to their environment and will startle easily at sudden sounds and movements.
- Avoid loud noises or sudden changes during this period.
- No vacuum cleaners, hair dryers, etc.
Social bonding begins to occur during this week. It is essential that the puppy remain with the litter and the mother.
- Each day introduce a new surface such as concrete, linoleum, wood, carpet, matting, etc.
Taking them two at a time will make it less stressful than one at a time.
- Very mild auditory stimuli is introduced, such as a radio playing quietly.

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Canine Socialization Period (3-7 weeks)

- Puppy learns specific behaviors that make him a dog, such as barking, chasing, biting and body postures.
- *Leaving the litter before 7 weeks can affect a puppy's ability to get along with other dogs later and it will likely have trouble learning to inhibit the force of its bite.*
- Puppies are learning to accept discipline from mama dog and to use submissive postures to appease.
- Puppies require plenty of play time with littermates, so they can socialize.
- Play fighting becomes increasingly intense.
- Pups are developing problem-solving abilities, physical coordination and bite inhibition.
- Puppy's rate of mental development will now depend on the complexity of its environment.
- Exposure to a variety of noises and different floor surfaces is important. Introduce situations that will stimulate problem-solving behavior - tunnels, cardboard boxes, gates, steps, fences, logs, etc.
- Put an open crate in the puppy pen. A clear distinction between sleep and play area should be made. This ensures the puppy can leave his sleeping area to potty. This will make housetraining later much easier.
- Each puppy should have one-on-one individual attention with humans. Take two at a time for short car rides.
- This is also the prime socialization period; introduce new people, especially children.
- Occasionally isolate puppies to prepare them for separation.
- Begin positive training sessions at 5 weeks. Puppies can begin simple training routines using food lures, verbal praise and attention at this time.
- Allow pups to have successes and reinforce these successes with food.

Human Socialization Period (7-12 weeks)

- This is when we can have the greatest impact on our dogs! Absolutely critical period in which puppy should be socialized - maximize this time!
- Best time to bring a puppy into its new home is around week 7 or 8. "The 49th day" is recommended by Guide Dog raisers and supported by studies.
- Mental abilities are fully formed but the pups lack experience.
- Ideal time to capitalize on educating your puppy – enroll in a good puppy class.
- 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.
- Take into account puppy's physical limitations and short attention span.
- Bladder and bowel control is developed and pups are capable of sleeping through the night without an accident.

Note: If not socialized properly during 12-14 weeks of age, shyness or reactivity/aggressiveness may dominate puppy's behavior the rest of his life. Lack of exposure to people (especially

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children) and other animals is thought to be the primary reason for behavior problems. Just because your puppy lives with another dog or there are two children 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 behaviors later.

Fear Imprint Period between 8 and 12 weeks

- Experiences a puppy perceives as traumatic during this time are generalized and may affect him his entire life.
- 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.
- Use food to make positive associations
- Have volunteers participate in "mock vet examinations" and use treats
- Practice giving "fake vaccinations" with a pen and use treats
- Make car rides fun!
- Make crate training fun with toys and treats.

Seniority Classification Period (3-4 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.
- As long as you provide structure, guidance and leadership, this transition should be relatively painless.
- By 16 weeks of age the brain of a puppy will reach 80% of full development where 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 and always-positive RECALL ('come' command) and practice it everyday. Do this before pup enters the "flight period" at about 16 weeks.

Flight Instinct Period (4-8 months)

- When you notice a change in your dog during this time, he is probably going through his "flight instinct" period. Characterized by independence and willfulness, this stage can last from a few days to several weeks and can occur anytime during this period.
- Like a teenager going through puberty, your puppy is changing physiologically. Your awareness of these changes in behavior will help get you through this commonly difficult period.
- Even if you have done your homework it does not mean your puppy won't go through this - just be aware of it and ride it out.
- Your once 'obedient' pup may not hang on your every word.
- Your pup may not come when called, even though he has up until now. Use a long line in the park as life insurance. Don't allow him to find out how much fun it is to run down the block with you chasing him!
- They may not play fetch even though they once did.
- A puppy may have lapses in potty training.

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- A puppy will be uncomfortable because its adult teeth are growing in. Be prepared with appropriate chew bones (large enough so that the pup will not choke) to help with your pup's need to chew.

Second Fear Imprint period (6-14 months)

- This fear period corresponds with hormonal changes & growth spurts. Many dogs will show a rise in their level of reactivity (aggressive displays when startled or frightened) to new situations, objects, people or other dogs during this time.
- They may become protective and territorial.
- Incidents of “teenage flakiness” and testing of owners may recur.
- In large breeds this period could extend longer since it is tied to sexual maturity.
- Incidents may occur more than once.
- Positively reinforce the behaviors you want.
- If your puppy appears apprehensive, avoid pressuring him. Allow him to approach as he is ready. Praise confidence.
- *In the event of an aggressive display, provide space, not correction.* You are his support system. When confronted by scary things, he needs you to give him space and time to acclimate and build confidence. He needs to feel safe. The fear of new situations must be handled with the utmost patience. Continue positive socialization exposure, but be careful to avoid overwhelming situations. Flooding (throwing him in to "sink or swim") is to be avoided.
- Avoid any potentially overwhelming circumstances you cannot personally oversee, such as shipping your pup in the cargo bay of an airplane.

Young Adulthood (18-24 months)

- It is recommended that your pup remains crated or the equivalent (structure) when you are not available to supervise his behavior.
- You will know when your dog can be trusted by testing him for short periods (10-15 minutes) while you leave the house. If your dog is damaging property while loose, he is not ready.
- Many dogs will show a rise in their level of reactivity (aggressive displays when startled or frightened) during this time. They may become protective and territorial, and may make a new attempt to test owners.
- Work with a qualified dog training and behavior professional to learn strategies and techniques to address behaviors as they come up.
- Undesirable behaviors *do not go away on their own.* Don't make the mistake of thinking your dog is just “going through a stage” and will snap out of it. He will continue to rely on you for leadership and guidance.
- Continue socializing! Like training, which continues into adulthood and throughout your dog's entire life, you are never finished with socialization. Your dog still needs to meet and greet people, go places with you, and continue to experience the human world.

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Tips to deal with fear periods (and dogs that are fearful in general)

These tips will come handy to help you deal with your dog's fear periods. However, they also work for dogs that are fearful in general. While they are effective, keep in mind that your dog's tendency for being fearful maybe the work of genetics rather than a temporary problem resulting from a fear stage.

Following are some tips to help your puppy or dog get through these frightening fear periods.

Remain as calm as possible

Our dogs are masters in reading our emotions and body language. If you are overly concerned or even just a bit tense about your dog acting fearfully or defensively, your dog will sense it. Don't put tension on the leash or talk to your dog in a worried or flustered manner. Stay relaxed and loose.

Pretend it's no big deal

Imagine you are injured and when the doctor walks in the exam room she says "Holy cow! Oh my gosh! Oh wow!" and looks like she's about to freak out. Would you feel confident at that moment that everything is going to be OK? Of course not. Keep this in mind when your dog startles at something. Some people find it helpful to say something in a loving and casual (not coddling or alarmed) tone, such as "It's just a garbage truck you silly boy." And carry on with what you were doing.

Counter condition

If your dog acts fearfully towards a certain stimuli you can try to change your dog's emotional response by using treats or anything the dog finds rewarding. The moment your dog sees the threatening stimulus give treats, the moment the threatening stimulus disappears take the treats away.

Don't overwhelm, desensitize!

Work under the threshold from a distance your dog or puppy does not react fearfully and is able to take treats. If you overwhelm and flood your puppy, you risk sensitizing your puppy which means you make him more fearful. Don't force your puppy to interact with the feared stimulus; rather allow him to investigate whatever he fears on his own and remember to praise/reward any initiative your puppy or dog takes.

Socialize, socialize, socialize

Fear periods are part of a dog's developmental stages. The more your dog is exposed to stimuli and learns there is nothing to be scared about, the more confident he will be in the future when he encounters anything intimidating. While the window of opportunity for [the puppy socialization phase](#) closes at around 14 to 16 weeks, socialization opportunities should never end.

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Don't punish the fear

Last but not least, avoid punishing the fear. It appears that the majority of dog aggressive displays are due to fear; therefore, by punishing the behavior you will only exacerbate the fear. Ignore the fear and let your dog build confidence by letting him investigate things on his own when he is ready and praising for the effort.

While behaviorists have studied fear periods for some time, it is important to keep in mind that they may not occur within that exact time frame for each puppy. If your dog is going through a fear period, keep in mind that it is not the end of the world. With guidance, desensitization and counter conditioning, your puppy or dog should recover nicely with time.