

DOG STAR DAILY

Personality Development

- The Pup is Parent of the Dog -
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All owners hope that their young pup will develop into a happy-go-lucky, well behaved, good-natured adult dog that above all, lives to a fine old age. Without a doubt, appropriate puppy education is the single most important factor to ensure this outcome. The nature of the puppy's socialization and training depends very much on the changing physical and mental capabilities and constraints during the various stages of personality development from birth to maturity.

Ease of learning changes considerably throughout a dog's development. Just as very young puppies commonly experience difficulties trying to master and remember new obedience instructions, older dogs often show similar severe learning constraints when attempting to change their behavior and temperament. For example, it is much harder to teach an older dog good habits, if he has already been allowed to develop bad ones. Moreover, modifying temperament problems becomes progressively more difficult as the dog grows older.



Socialization, confidence building and temperament training must be accomplished during puppyhood. So many training and behavior problems are created within the first week the pup is at home and so, think ahead — a spoonful of prevention is worth buckets of cure. Without a doubt, education is the key to effortlessly and enjoyably raise a good-natured and well-behaved adult dog. To allow a puppy to achieve his full potential, intelligent owners must know exactly what they are going to do vis a vis the pup's educational curriculum and social agenda, before they acquire a new puppy. Extremely intelligent owners will make sure they know exactly what to do even before they chose a puppy. Attend a number of local puppy classes to educate yourself. By observing the pups and chatting to their owners you will quickly get an idea of what to expect.

Stages of Development

Following John Paul Scott and John Fuller's pioneering studies on dog behavior, puppy development has been traditionally divided into five fairly distinct stages:

1. Neonatal (birth – 2 weeks);
2. Transitional (2–3 weeks);
3. Socialisation 3–13 weeks);
4. Adolescence (13 weeks – 6 months);
5. Adulthood.

A neonatal or newborn pup is equipped to do little but suckle and sleep. During the transition period, the pup's eyes and ears open and he begins to move about. The puppy becomes progressively more aware of his environment, such that by the end of the third week, littermates begin to establish important social relationships, which are the harbingers of the social hierarchy of adult dogs. The bitch gradually becomes less important to the puppies and

the period of socialization arbitrarily terminates after weaning. The adolescent period extends until puberty, whereafter the dog attains sexual maturity.

Developmental Transition

Scientists divide development into separate stages largely for descriptive convenience. However, development is a continual and dynamic process: Dogs do not abruptly leave one stage and enter another, rather the progression is smooth and the stages overlap considerably. Few puppies conform to the precise developmental time table described by scientists and pinpointing developmental dates, such as a hypothetical “fear imprint” period to a specific week, let alone a specific day, really is as simplistic as it is unrealistic. Specific transitional dates represent averages of many dogs and the very existence of even a single individual “textbook” dog à la Dr. Spot is highly unlikely.

In reality, a dog's behavior and temperament are always in a state of flux, or developmental transition. For example, puberty is not a precise point separating puppyhood from adulthood but rather, puberty is a progressive developmental process per se — an ongoing period of social as well as sexual maturation, starting as early as 18 weeks and lasting until two years of age in small dogs and up to three years of age in the larger breeds. It would be more accurate to describe the dog's entire lifespan as a single extended transitional phase of development.

Critical Period of Socialization

Some researchers have termed the socialization stage as the “Critical Period” believing it to be so incredibly important for the dog's behavioral development. Indeed, the period of socialization is critical in terms of its crucial importance in producing a friendly companion dog. After the eyes and ears have opened, the pup is literally bombarded with new and intriguing stimuli and experiences, which exert a maximal and long-lasting effect on shaping the dog's future personality and temperament. However, the socialization period is not critically restricted to the arbitrary and limited 3–13 week time constraints as suggested by original researchers

Basically, in any young animal, whether precocious or altricial, the earlier the experience, the more crucial its role in the development of the adult's future temperament. And so is the case with dogs. Both the magnitude and the permanence of the effects of experience decrease as the puppy grows older. Specifically, physical and social stimulation during the first six weeks of a dog's life is of the utmost importance for forming and modifying the dog's adult temperament. However, since pups are essentially blind and deaf when born, visual and auditory stimuli were considered to be of minor experiential importance during the first two or three weeks of life. Consequently, the Critical Period of Socialization was deemed not to commence until three weeks of age. But neonatal puppies actually can see and hear to some extent. Also they can smell, they can taste, and they can feel. Therefore, early tactile and olfactory/gustatory stimulation are vitally important and to all intents of purpose, social development begins at birth. Similarly, citing 13 weeks of age as the termination of the Critical Period was merely an arbitrary decision made by researchers — a decision which had very little relevance to the social world of companion dogs. In reality, the period of socialization never ends. When socialization continues, dogs become even more socialized, whereas when socialization is discontinued (e.g., when dogs are kenneled, or not walked regularly), dogs gradually de-socialize until eventually they may become fearful, asocial, or even antisocial.

If as adults, dogs are to be expected to amiably socialize with other dogs and people, then especially during the impressionable Critical Period, i.e., as early as possible, puppies should be exposed to a wide variety of sociable and friendly dogs and people. This might sound obvious, but all too often, the obvious is neglected.

Applied Behavioral Stages of Development

From a pet owner's perspective and especially with regards the ease of training and the prevention of potential behavior and temperament problems, development could be simplified into three stages: 1. Socialization; 2. Adolescence; and 3. Adulthood.

The period of socialization and training lasts for the dog's entire life. Behavior never remains the same, it is always changing — sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse. No matter how friendly and well behaved your dog, always continue socializing and training — there is always room for improvement. Perfection is a worthy, yet illusive and Sisyphean goal. Moreover, if the dog's education is discontinued, his demeanor will likely deteriorate. Indeed, a dog may become a delinquent virtually overnight when he collides with adolescence, or he may become crotchety during old age.

Doggy adolescence is an abrupt and cataclysmic, yet extremely protracted period of change, starting as early as 18 weeks and sometimes dragging on until three years of age. (At least this state of affairs is not as bad as in the human male, wherein adolescence may persist for a lifetime!) Inadequate socialization and training during puppyhood makes its mark during adolescence. Characteristically, minor puppy rambunctiousness and rumbustiousness become manifested as major-league unruly behavior — jumping up, pulling on leash, hyperactivity, incessant barking and heavy duty household destruction. More disturbingly, the puppy's lack of confidence may rear its ugly head as fearfulness and/or aggression to other dogs or people.

Luckily, incipient adolescent problems may be nattily nipped in the bud by intelligent puppy training. However, even if your adolescent dog still remains a paragon of puppy good manners and exquisite temperament, do keep socializing and training. Remember, early socialization during puppyhood has enabled you to continue to socialize and control your dog as an adolescent and so, by the same mark, continue socializing and training throughout adolescence so that you may further continue to socialize your dog during adulthood.

If, on the other hand, a puppy's early education were insufficient or inappropriate, adolescence usually represents a period of frantic retraining. If this is the case, get to it and enroll in an adolescent class right away and nip these problems at the early flowering stage. Otherwise, the problems will get worse as the dog grows older — much worse in fact!

At long last, by three years of age, most dogs start to achieve social maturity — adulthood — delightfully dependable, calm, controlled, well-behaved, happy and friendly adulthood, which drifts into the dog's glorious sunset years. The dog's adulthood is a time for both dog and owner to reap the benefits of early puppy education, especially for the owner to enjoy the dog's good company, marvel at his endearing personality and to showcase his golden doggy demeanor.

Looking at development from an applied viewpoint, it is apparent that socialization, and especially puppy socialization, is the sine qua non of doggy husbandry — the hallmark of successfully raising a well adjusted canine companion. Certainly socialization, training, and education last forever, but from a couple of important practical considerations, (namely the puppy's current residence and his level of immunity), early puppy socialization and training may be divided into three separate substages — each with differing yet quite distinct objectives.

Applied Substages of Early Socialization

Neonatal pups are pretty fragile and helpless critters — they are barely ambulatory and have a number of sensory constraints. This does not mean to say socialization is out of the picture. On the contrary, neonatal pups are extremely sensitive and impressionable, and neonatal and early puppy socialization is of paramount importance, but it must be done carefully and gently.

Obviously the youngster is not yet sufficiently resilient to physically “run with the pack” and so, apart from interactions with the mother and littermates, dog–dog socialization must be put on hold for a while. This partial social vacuum offers an ideal opportunity to concentrate on desensitizing the puppies to the physical aspects of the home environment (especially noises) and to embark on the most important aspect of canine husbandry — socializing dogs with people. Unfortunately, by the time the puppy is old enough to start to play with other dogs, his immunity against the more common and serious canine diseases reaches an all–time nadir. By six weeks of age, puppies have an extremely depleted maternal immunity but have yet to acquire sufficient active immunity from their puppy shots. Until the pup has received, at the very least, a couple of puppy shots and has developed adequate immunity, it would be too silly to risk the pup venturing onto the streets, where he may come into contact with other dogs and/or their eliminatory products (which may be contaminated with bacteria and viruses). Thus unless there are other vaccinated adult dogs at his new residence, until the puppy is old enough to safely venture onto public property, he often lives within a complete social vacuum in terms of dog–dog interactions. This offers yet another ideal opportunity for the new owner to concentrate on pet dog training's prime directive — intensive dog–human socialization.

1. Original Home

Most puppies have adequate opportunity to socialize with their dam and littermates during their first few weeks. Additionally though, regular (several times a day) handling, gentling and calming by a wide variety of people (especially children, men and strangers) should be an essential ingredient of puppy husbandry, especially during the early weeks and especially with those breeds which are notoriously tricky when handled by strangers.

Exposure to a variety of sights and sounds should commence well before the eyes and ears are fully opened, especially with sound–sensitive and hand–sensitive breeds. Keep the television tuned to ESPN (male voices, shouting and screaming), or the occasional rock radio station. In order to prepare puppies for domestic living and desensitize them to noises and other household stimuli, it is essential the litter is raised indoors. If not, you will be playing catch–up before you even start the socialization timetable.

2. New Home — Puppy Younger than Three Months

Until the puppy has acquired sufficient active immunity, it is too risky to allow her to socialize with dogs of dubious immunization history, or dogs which have been in contact with the urine and/or feces of potentially infected dogs. Instead, during this time, concentrate fully on socializing the puppy to people. Never forget: Being accepting and friendly to people is the most important requirement of any companion dog.

Do not keep the pup a secret. Invite people home to meet the puppy. Invite family, friends, and neighbors. Of course, maintain routine hygiene at all times and certainly insist guests leave outdoor shoes outside and wash their hands before handling the puppy. But, during this impressionable phase of pet ownership, parties chez puppy should be de rigueur. Make sure to invite a few different people each day. It is not sufficient for the pup to meet the same people over and over, the puppy needs to grow accustomed to happily meeting at least a dozen strangers each day.

Have all the visitors handfeed dinner kibble while handling the pup. Carefully supervise all children. Instruct visitors how to use the kibble as lures and rewards to teach the pup to come, sit, lie down, stand, and roll over. In particular, insist all visitors practice teaching the puppy a few canine social graces, especially to sit when greeting people. Do not waste this golden opportunity: Rock solid temperaments are forged during this period.

3. New Home — Puppy Over Three Months

As soon as it is safe for the puppy to go on walks — take her on walks — lots of walks. There is no better overall socialization exercise and there is no better training exercise (teach the dog to sit or lie down every twenty yards or so), than the good old dog walk. And as an added benefit, dog walks are good for human health — good for the heart and good for the soul. Walk that dog! And, tie a pink bow to his collar and you will not believe the smiles you see and the new friends you make. A by-product of socializing your dog is a quantum leap in your own social life.

Also, the time is nigh to enroll the pup in a number of puppy play groups and puppy training classes. Singleton pups and puppies from small litters especially require socialization with other puppies and dogs at the earliest safest time. But above all, it's time to get out and have fun with your dog. For puppy classes in your area contact the Association of Pet Dog Trainers (www.apdt.com). And do not neglect your periodic Puppy Parties at home. Continue teaching all your friends, how to teach your puppy to come and sit etc. Why train the dog yourself? Train your family and friends to teach your dog!

The most important quality in a pet dog is her temperament: A dog with a good temperament can be a dream to live with but a dog with a tricky temperament is a perpetual nightmare. Moreover, regardless of breed or breeding, a dog's temperament — vis a vis his feelings towards people and other dogs — is largely the result of socialization (or lack of socialization) during puppyhood — the most important time in a dog's life.

Just as William Wordsworth wrote, "the child is father of the man," it would be appropriate to say: The pup is parent of the dog.

My heart beats fast when I can sniff
The odors on the grass:
So was it since the first prologue,
So is it now I am a dog;
So be it when I'm old and stiff,
Or let me pass!
The pup is parent of the dog:
And I wish my days to run
Bound each to each, domesticum.

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