



Understanding Your Puppy's Behavior and Development

Courtesy of the Dumb Friends League

Although feeding time is important, it is also vital to include petting, talking, and playing in your daily interactions with your puppy in order to help him develop good "people skills." Well-socialized dogs are more likely to have well-socialized puppies. Pups often mirror their mothers' calm or fearful attitude toward people; this is a normal part of their socialization. However, you also play a vital role.

The Basics

Puppies are usually weaned at six to seven weeks, but are still learning important skills as their mother gradually leaves them for longer periods of time. Puppies play with their littermates and develop appropriate "social skills," such as learning how to send and receive signals, what an "inhibited bite" (acceptable mouthing pressure) means, how far to go in play-wrestling, and so forth. Play is important for puppies because it increases their physical coordination, social skills, and learning limits. By interacting with their mother and littermates, puppies explore the ranking process ("who's in charge") and also learn "how to be a dog." Most dogs are still puppies, in mind and body, through the first two years of life. Skills not acquired during the first eight weeks may be lost forever. While these stages are important and fairly consistent, a dog's mind remains receptive to new experiences and lessons well beyond puppyhood.

General Guidelines

Birth to two weeks: Neonatal period

- Puppy is most influenced by his mother.
- Senses of touch and taste are present at birth.

Two to four weeks: Transitional period

- Puppy is most influenced by his mother and littermates.
- Eyes open, teeth begin to come in, and develop senses of hearing and smell.
- Puppy begins to stand, walk a little, wag tail, and bark.
- By the fourth or fifth week, eyesight is well-developed.

Three to 12 weeks: Socialization period

- During this period, puppy needs opportunities to safely meet other dogs and people.
- By three to five weeks, puppy becomes aware of his surroundings, companions (both canine and human), and relationships, including play.
- By four to six weeks, puppy is most influenced by littermates and is learning about being a dog.

- From four to 12 weeks, puppy remains influenced by littermates and is also influenced by people. Puppy learns to play, develops social skills, learns about an inhibited bite, explores social structure/ranking, and improves physical coordination.
- By five to seven weeks, puppy develops curiosity and explores new experiences. Puppy needs positive "people" experiences during this time.
- By seven to nine weeks, puppy is refining his physical skills and coordination, and can begin to be housetrained. Puppy has full use of senses.
- By eight to 10 weeks, puppy experiences real fear involving normal objects and experiences; puppy needs positive training during this time.
- By nine to 12 weeks, puppy is refining reactions, developing social skills with littermates (appropriate interactions), and exploring the environment and objects. Puppy begins to focus on people; this is a good time to begin training.

Three to six months: Ranking period

- Puppy is most influenced by "playmates," which may now include those of other species.
- Puppy begins to see and use ranking (dominance and submission) within the household (the puppy's "pack"), including humans.
- Puppy begins teething (and associated chewing).
- At four months of age, puppy experiences another fear stage.

Six to 18 months: Adolescence

- Puppy is most influenced by human and dog "pack" members.
- At seven to nine months, puppy goes through a second chewing phase, part of exploring territory.
- Puppy increases exploration of dominance, including challenging humans.
- If not spayed or neutered, puppy experiences beginnings of sexual behavior.