

Puppy Development Stages

The most important time in a puppy's development is during the first year, especially during the first 4 months of life. By understanding the development stages, we can provide our puppies with what they need in the best way it can be presented, and when they need it. Optimal development demands it!

The Imprinting Period: First 4 Months of Age

Like children and other species, puppies have a small window of time during brain development when they are most impressionable. This is called the imprinting, or critical learning period. For puppies, the imprinting period is during the first 16 weeks of life. Puppies learn things during this time that they can't learn later in life. Once this window closes at 16 weeks, you're looking at remedial education for anything they didn't get to learn. Therefore, the quality and quantity of their experiences during the first 4 months has a huge impact on their future personalities and truly determines the formation of many of their "good" or "bad" behavior tendencies. In fact, such vast change in development happens with each day that passes, the Imprinting Period is further subdivided into multiple distinct puppy stages.

First 7 Weeks (Neonatal Period, Transition Period, and First Socialization Period)

In the first 7 weeks of life, puppies gain use of all the senses, become mobile, start growing baby teeth, transition to eating solid foods, and become completely weaned (independent) from their dog moms.

Learning is already rapidly occurring, making it important that human caretakers provide puppies with specific neurological stimulation, a complex environment, and careful, yet thorough, socialization for proper development and adjustment to living in human society. This does not mean constant exposure to highly varied stimuli, but careful and controlled exposure to select stimuli with positive outcomes and plenty of respite from the stimuli so the puppies can recover and de-stress.

During this time, there are also very critical lessons that the puppies must learn from their dog moms and siblings. Therefore, puppies should not be removed from their original homes before 7 weeks of age. It is important, however, that the puppies be separated from their mom and littermates at some time from 7 to 10 weeks so that they can attain their full potential as confident dogs and be fully bonded to their human companion(s). Adopting puppy littermates is not usually successful in terms of creating dogs that are fun and trainable because dogs bond more naturally and easily with dogs than with people and you'll be competing with that as you

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try to become best friends with two puppies at once. Keeping a puppy with Mom is likewise not best for the puppy or his dog mom.

7–16 Weeks (Second Socialization Period)

The optimal time for puppies to be placed with their new human families is at 7-10 weeks of age. This age of placement depends on various factors, but as long as the new human family understands what the puppy stages are and is ready to address the puppy's needs at each stage, we have some flexibility here. As soon as your puppy comes home, time is of the essence for you to provide a huge helping of high-quality socialization and schooling. This is the key to creating a socially self-confident, well-behaved puppy that is strongly bonded to you. It is also the key to preventing yappy, shy, and/or aggressive behaviors from developing later in life! It's important to remember that "downtime" is part of socialization, too. Puppies need to learn to wait for fun time. Teaching them to be alone, to comfort themselves, and to relax is key in preventing separation distress and destructive behaviors when left alone

Fear-Impact Period: During the Second Socialization Period, when your puppy is around 8-11 weeks of age, it is important to be aware of the approach of his first Fear-Impact Period. If puppies have "bad" or scary experiences during this time, the impressions are likely to last a lifetime and resurface during maturity. So, protect your puppy from these long-term effects by avoiding bad experiences. "Bad" to your puppy might not look "bad" to you! Should your puppy become afraid for any reason, dangerous or not, immediately step in and remove him/her from the situation. That is good parenting! Better yet, be constantly vigilant for situations which *could* scare him; five children falling on a puppy in exuberance may seem cute, but it's scary to puppies.

4–6 Months (Juvenile Period)

During this time, your puppy will gain more energy, and become more "mouthy" and restless from the discomfort of teething as the baby teeth begin to fall out and the adult teeth erupt. This will typically occur between 4-6 months of age, but sometimes lasts longer.

Your puppy will also begin to acquire an adult coat and attain most of her height. During this time, the puppy will also become sexually mature, so some people spay or neuter them during this stage. Others wait until the pup is at least a year old. It's important to prevent breeding if you are going to wait.

Second Fear-Impact Period: Starting as early as the 5th month of the Juvenile period, there may be a Second Fear-Impact Period that lasts for about 3 weeks. This is similar to the First Fear-Impact Period. If it does not occur at this time, it will occur later during the Adolescent Period.

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6–12 Months (Adolescent Period)

Hold on tight—your puppy will now be attaining full “puppy power” and will begin to test his/her wings! This is usually a difficult time for many puppy parents, but can be a mess for those with puppies that missed early establishment of boundaries, socialization and training.

Your puppy will be likely to have much more energy, spend more time exploring the environment, become easily distracted, and may even seem less interested in you and forgetful of his/her training skills. Just be patient, consistent, and supportive—make sure boundaries are still clearly in place, review your training, and continue building on your successes.

Second Fear-Impact Period (if it didn’t occur earlier): Puppies that did not experience their Second Fear-Impact Period during the 4 – 6 month period will experience it during the Adolescent Period. The Second Fear-Impact period is similar to the First Fear-Impact Period and lasts for approximately 3 weeks.

1–4 Years of Age (Maturity Period)

Physically, small-medium breed puppies develop more quickly than larger to giant breed puppies. Smaller breed puppies will usually attain maturity by around 1 year of age and large-giant puppies can take 2 or even 3 years.

Mentally and socially, a dog may be considered a puppy for up to 4 years! Each dog is an individual and will express his own genetics and the effects of the process by which he was nurtured; but these stages have been repeatedly documented by scientific research and hold true for all puppies. Your careful attention to your puppy’s upbringing will result in a lifetime with a pleasant dog in most cases, and is worth the effort.

For further information, refer to

Genetics and the Social Behavior of the Dog by John Paul Scott and John L. Fuller, 1965

The New Knowledge of Dog Behavior by Clarence Pfaffenberger, 1963

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