

THE BASICS OF PUPPY BEHAVIOR AND PROBLEM PREVENTION

*Meghan E. Herron, DVM, DACVB
Behavioral Medicine Clinic
The Ohio State University College of Veterinary Medicine
vet.osu.edu/behavior*

Development

Period	Age
Prenatal	Conception to birth
Neonatal	0-14 days
Transitional	14-21 days
Socialization	3-12 (14) weeks
Juvenile	3-6 (7) months
Sexual maturity reached	6-7 months
Social maturity reached	18 months – 4 years

Prenatal Period

- Fetal development
 - Effects of stress
 - ↑ Cortisol
 - Changes 'set point' HPA axis
 - High emotionality as adults
 - Puppy mills?

Neonatal Period

(0-13 days)

- Born deaf and blind, poor smell
- Eating and sleeping most of time
- Anogenital stimulation required from bitch for elimination
- Very limited learning capabilities, although they can learn to avoid bitter taste under 3 days

Transitional Period

(14-20 days)

- Eyes open
- Tooth eruption
- Able to stand
- Anogenital stimulation not longer required for elimination

Transitional Period

(14-20 days)

- Learn to avoid pain
 - No emotional learning yet
 - No change in heart rate
 - Don't learn from bad experience
- Startle response ENDS transitional period
 - Hearing begins

Socialization Period

(3-12 weeks)

- Gradual wean starts at 4 weeks
- Leave nest to eliminate
- Offer play behaviors
- Social relationships develop
 - 6-8 week peak for human socialization
- Avoidance response
- Fearful postures develop
- Learn from bad experiences
- Early illness predisposes to
 - Aggression problems
 - Fear of strangers and children
 - Separation-related problems
- Isolation during this period leads to learning deficits and fear response
 - "kennel dog syndrome"
 - Dogs
 - Humans (children?)
 - Environmental changes
 - Sounds

Fear Period

(8-10 weeks)

- Very sensitive to traumatic experience
- Single scary event can have life-long effects
- Can retain fear of person, dog, object
- HANDLE WITH CARE!

What is fearful behavior?

- Trembling
- Ears back
- Tail tucked
- Freezing

- Hiding
- Avoidance
- Dilated pupils
- Growling
- Showing teeth
- Snapping/biting
- “Whale eye”
- Barking while backing away
- Excessive fidgeting

Juvenile Period

(3-6 months)

- Rapid growth
- Increasing independence
- Sexual interest begins
- Teething occurs
 - Destructive chewing peaks

Adolescence

- Time between sexual and social maturity
- Second fear period
 - 3 weeks duration, between 4-11 months
 - Same rules apply – handle with care!
 - Maintain social experience and skills throughout adolescence
 - “Use it or lose it!”

Social maturity

- As early as 18 months
- As late as 4 years
- More proactive defense
- Fearful puppies tend to become biters at this point

Puppy Prep School

- Set puppies up for success by covering the basics early:
 - Socialization
 - Early low stress handling
 - Independence training
 - Housetraining
 - Crate training
 - Discouraging mouthing
 - Basic Manners
 - Avoidance of harsh punishment

Socialization

- People
 - Age, race, sex
- Dogs
 - Socially appropriate adult
- Leash, collar, head halter?
- Bikes, skateboards, wheelchairs
- Hats, winter clothing
- Crate, car

Puppy Kindergarten

“Taking a puppy to puppy class is the single best thing an owner can do to their dog in its entire life” -Andrew Luescher, DVM, PhD, DACVB

- Study: Puppies that attended socialization class were more likely to be retained in their homes (Duxbury et al 2003)
- Goal: Puppy socialization and owner education
- If your practice does not offer such classes, find one
 - Observe class yourself
 - Puppies 4 months of age or younger
 - Appropriate supervision
- Train your staff to teach class
- Bonds clients to your practice
 - DOGS! course
 - Offered for veterinarians and veterinary technicians at Purdue University

Vaccine Conundrum

- Should we isolate puppies until they are fully vaccinated?
 - Absolutely not
 - More likely to lose pet over a behavior problem than from infectious disease
- Make wise choices for socialization
 - Avoid dog parks, pet stores, etc.
 - Make play dates with healthy, socially mature, dogs with a history of appropriate social behavior with dogs

Early low-stress handling

- Remember that puppies are typically in their first fear period at the time of their first vaccine appointment
- Potential frightening stimuli include:
 - Cold exam table
 - Rectal temperature assessment

- Vaccine injection
- Nail trims
- Physical manipulation by a stranger
- How do we prevent long lasting fear of the veterinary clinic?

ASSOCIATE FOOD WITH EVERYTHING!

- Squeeze cheese
- Kong paste
- Peanut butter
- Canned food
- “Behavior vaccine”
- At home mock vet exam
 - Feet, ears, tail, mouth, exam table
 - Owner can use healthy treats to create a positive association

Independence

- Practice spending time alone
- Crate training
- Frozen food toys - tethered
- “Place” training
- D.A.P.® (Dog Appeasing Pheromone – synthetic version of pheromone released from mammary area on lactating bitch)
 - Has been shown to reduce nighttime separation distress in puppies
 - Has been shown to decrease fear and improve socialization during puppy kindergarten
- Always make the crate a positive experience!

Housetraining

- SUPERVISION
 - Must be able to SEE puppy at all times when loose in house
- Frequent opportunities for success
 - Set a timer for every hour for first 2 weeks,
 - Also after play, sleeping, eating, etc.
- Meal feeding
 - What goes in on schedule, should come out on schedule
- Food and verbal rewards
- Accompany pup outside
- Give food reward and verbal praise immediately following urination and defecation
 - Do not wait until puppy comes back inside
- Crate/Confinement
 - Can utilize when unable to supervise
 - Potty pads outside of crate if left alone for long periods

- Interruption of indoor elimination rather than punishment
 - Clap hands, squeaker
 - Idea is to stop behavior without scaring the puppy
 - Do not want pup to be afraid of urinating in front of the owner
 - May just learn to go into another room
 - Punishment after the fact is ineffective at decreasing indoor elimination
- Umbilical method
 - Owner attaches leash to belt loop
 - For difficult cases (small breeds)

Crate Training

- Why crate train?
 - Housetraining
 - Safety
 - Independence
 - A place to escape
- Pick a crate
 - Big enough to sit, stand, lie on side, and turn around
 - Can block off larger crates
- Happy place!
 - Where family spends time
 - Meals, treats, Kongs
 - Access to water
 - Ice cubes or frozen bowl if needed
- Gradually increase time spent in crate
 - Start with door open
- Bedtime
 - Move crate or place 2nd crate in bedroom
 - Don't forget bedtime snack!

The mouthy pup

- Normal behavior in young puppies
 - Taste and facial sensation are the 1st senses to develop
 - Information gathering and food seeking
 - Mother typically discourages rough or harsh biting
- Persistent mouthing over 12 weeks of age may be a sign of
 - Premature maternal separation
 - Displacement behavior in anxious pups
 - Early signs of aggression if seen in the context of resource guarding and handling
 - Learned attention seeking behavior
 - Discouraging mouthy behavior

- Avoid play with hands and feet
- Avoid rough play or handling that increases arousal
- Always have a toy available
 - Set puppy up for success
 - Mouth on toy, not on hand

Discouraging mouthy behavior

- Provide appropriate chewing outlets
 - “Environment of plenty”
 - Nyla-bones
 - Kong toys
 - Busy Buddy toys
 - Durable stuffed toys
 - Meals via puzzle toys
 - Discouraging mouthy behavior
- Remove all attention in response to mouthing
 - Pull hands away
 - Avoid eye contact
 - No talking
- High pitched “ouch” works in some cases
 - Caution this does not provoke fear in puppy
 - Caution this does not increase arousal and inadvertently reward mouthing
 - Always redirect to a toy when once pup calms down

Basic Manners

- Don’t encourage behaviors now that will not be desirable from an adult dog
 - Jumping
 - Pawing
 - Mouthing
 - Sitting on lap (owner preference)
- “Sit” as default behavior
 - Every normal 8 week old puppy is capable of “sit”
 - Hold treat to nose, lure head back and up
 - Rear-end automatically goes down
 - No need to push on rump
 - “Sit” for attention
 - “Sit” for food
 - “Sit” for toys
 - “Sit” for leash walks

Avoid punishment

- Does not teach appropriate behavior
- Inhibits learning and offering of new behaviors
- May have devastating effects during fear periods
- Can create fear of owner
- May exacerbate existing fear or aggression
- Attempts to punish aggression do not address underlying motivation and are dangerous

Red flag alerts

- Avoidance of people, animals, objects
 - Indication of fear – may progress to aggression during adolescence and social maturity
 - Create a positive emotional response NOW
- Alarm barking, lunging, hackles up
 - Not normal in a puppy – seek help NOW
- Excessive mouthing over handling
 - May progress to aggression later – toenail trims? Vet exam? Ear cleaning?
 - Pain?
- Reluctance to “sit” or “down”
 - PAIN! Hip and elbow dysplasia may manifest early in certain breeds
 - Anxiety
 - Anxious dogs have difficulty focusing and may not be comfortable with focused interactions
 - Often referred to as “stubborn” or “hyper”
- Excessive vocalization in crate or home alone
- Inability to settle in crate
- Pup will not eat food without owner present
 - May all be indications of early separation or confinement anxiety
- Repeated elimination in appropriately-sized crate – NOT normal
 - Learned helplessness
 - Crate anxiety
 - Congenital abnormality

Summary

- Be knowledgeable about developmental periods to maximize training success and avoid detrimental effects during training.
- Advocate interruption rather than punishment.
- Be on the look out for early indications of anxiety and aggression and intervene or refer immediately. The earlier the intervention the better the chance for change.

How can we get all of this information to puppy owners?

- Make a checklist
 - Include information on health, behavior, and nutrition

- Schedule extra time for puppy visits
 - Divide topics among the vaccine appointments
- Ultimate Puppy Toolkit™
- Puppy kindergarten
- Veterinary behaviorist
 - Study: Puppies under 4 months of age whose owners met with a veterinary behaviorist for one hour showed fewer behavior problems as adults (Gazzano et al 2008)
 - “Head Start” problem prevention appointments

Further Reading

- *Before and After You Get Your Puppy* – Ian Dunbar
- *The Biology of Animal Stress* – Gary Moberg and Joy Mench
- *Domestic Animal Behavior* – Katherine Houpt
- *The Domestic Dog* – James Serpell
- *Genetics and the Social Behavior of the Dog* – John Scott and John Fuller
- *Handbook of Behavior Problems of the Dog and Cat* – Gary Landsberg, Wayne Hunthausen, Lowell Ackerman
- *Low stress handling, restraint and behavior modification of dogs & cats : techniques for developing patients who love their visits* – Sophia Yin