

# Understanding Your New Puppy

A GUIDE TO EARLY DEVELOPMENT, COMMON PROBLEMS, AND HOW TO GIVE YOUR PUPPY THE BEST START

## Why Is It Important?

Dogs who are allowed to develop normally in appropriate family groups with proper socialization are less likely to suffer from fear and anxiety. Dogs without fear and anxiety are easier to train, live longer, have better quality of life, and are healthier than dogs who do suffer from anxiety.

## Neurodevelopment and Sensitive Periods

The experiences and development of your puppies parents and grandparents, as well as their time in utero all contribute to the individual your puppy will become. This is due to a process called "epigenetics" which refers to modification of the genome which is then heritable. Consider this when choosing a puppy. That said, your puppy's temperament is only ~30% determined by genetics, the rest is determined by their environment, resources, and social interactions.

Puppies have "sensitive periods", when they most benefit from certain types of learning experiences. Understanding these special windows of opportunity can help avoid behavioral problems. Consider the sensitive periods discussed below. Regardless of where you get your puppy, the period between birth and 8.5 weeks should be spent with their mother and littermates. This critical time teaches your new companion how to calm themselves, and appropriate exposures to dogs and other species (including humans) will prevent heightened reactivity in the future.



0-13 days

During this period, your puppy is fully dependent on their mother. Human handling is essential during this time. This exposure will make the puppy more comfortable with handling in the future



13-20 days

Your puppy starts to see, hear, and explore their surroundings. They are socially interacting with littermates and begin to play-fight. Positive interactions with humans at this time will help your puppy become friendly and confident.



3-8 weeks

The puppy should interact with people, other species, and other breeds of dog. All new experiences at this time encourage normal neurological and emotional development, and will reduce reactivity in the future. Aversive experiences should be avoided



5-12 weeks

Your playful puppy is weaned and able to bark and growl. At 8.5 weeks of age they are capable of inhibiting eliminations. Potty training can begin. 8.5 weeks is the earliest that your puppy may be brought home with you without significant adverse effects.



14-20 weeks

Your companion is curious and exploring the world around them (provided they had many varied experiences before 14 weeks of age). If they did not, distress and fear of new things may be observed. Your puppy is not socially mature until 12-36 months

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Dogs are affected by the duration of time which they are left at home alone. Before bringing your puppy home, determine how frequently you or a family member will be home to play with them and let them out. Extended periods alone increase fear and separation anxiety behaviors.



### Learning and Training

### Training: Puppy Class

Training throughout early puppyhood is an excellent way to build a relationship with your dog, and will greatly improve behavior. Fear and stress impair your puppy's ability to learn and integrate knowledge, so avoid triggering these responses during training. Many dogs are relinquished at 5-6 months old, when they mature past early puppyhood without training and owners are no longer able to manage their behavior. Behavioural problems are listed as a reason for relinquishment in 40% of cases.

Consistent and predictable feedback is the key to success when it comes to raising your puppy. Verbal cues, hand signals, and positive rewards should be clear and consistent over time, and with each family member.

In training, it is essential to mark the correct behaviours and behaviours that are "on the right track". This gives your puppy the information they require to decide to repeat desired actions. Marking incorrect responses should be done gently with a verbal cue. This should occur only once a framework to mark correct behaviors is well established.

Puppies do best with consistent and predictable:



Walk Schedules.



Mealtimes.



Exercise.



Training.

### Regular vet visits



Regular visits to your vet will keep your puppy vaccinated against communicable diseases, and is a great opportunity to discuss any behavioural concerns and get advice and trainer recommendations. Regular "well" vaccine visits and "happy visits" (which are veterinary visits with no procedures or exams performed) can help your puppy to avoid developing veterinary fear, anxiety, and stress. This will make future visits easier for the lifetime of your dog. Your vet will also discuss the appropriate time to spay or neuter your puppy should you elect to do so.

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## Identifying and Troubleshooting Common Issues

"My breeder says my puppy is outgoing, confident, and ready to go home at 7 weeks of age. Is it OK to pick her up just a bit early?"

- 8.5 weeks of age is the absolute earliest any puppy should leave their mother and littermates. In truth, most puppies would benefit from additional time in their family unit.
- Picking up your puppy early increases the risk of them developing fear, anxiety, and behavioral problems down the road.

"There is a very cute puppy at the pet store, if I train him, will he become behaviorally identical to a dog raised with littermates in a home setting?"

- Counter conditioning and training are excellent tools, but due to sensitive learning periods as well as epigenetics, your pet shop puppy may always have heightened levels of arousal and reactivity. Especially when it comes to new people and environments as well as noises.
- Obtaining a puppy who was born in a puppy mill will require behavioral modifications, and may never be as confident and well-adjusted as a puppy raised in a secure family group.

"My friend says that I should wait to let my dogs meet other dogs until a second round of vaccinations at 14 to 16 weeks. Is that accurate?"

- Puppies are certainly more susceptible to communicable diseases than adult dogs. This is the reason puppies are often meant to wait until vaccination to fully socialize.
- However, behavioral problems are central to many relinquishments and lead to increased fear and stress in your puppy. The sensitive period for exploration and introduction to new species and environments is prior to 14 weeks.
- Expose your puppy to safe, vaccinated dogs, and varied environments. Steer clear of areas where many unknown dogs walk (dog parks) and defecate to help minimize your risk while allowing your puppy to explore.

"My dog is barking and growling and has his body low to the ground. What does this mean? Is he dominant or submissive?"

- It is excellent that you are paying attention to the communication signals your dog is offering!
- Canine communication is complex, and context is critical to understanding this response.
  - Is this a response to an unfamiliar person?
  - Is this a response to a flag suddenly flapping in the wind on a walk?
  - Is there a dog in a yard across the street barking with its hackles raised?
- Canine behavior is much more complex than dominant vs submission, and acknowledging the complexity will help you better evaluate the response. "Dominance" is often incorrectly used to describe animals who in truth have extreme behavioral pathology. Recognizing this allows for training and conditioning.
- Take videos and photographs! These videos and photographs can help you and your trainer or veterinary behaviourist get a better idea of what is going on. Slow motion videos can be extremely helpful in complex situations.

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***Although this is informative and helpful, please discuss any behavioral/medical concerns with your local veterinarian. For all cases where you still have concerns, seek specialist services ([www.dacvb.org](http://www.dacvb.org)). At AVC you can contact the AVC Behavioural Medicine Service ([AVCBehaviouralMed@upei.ca](mailto:AVCBehaviouralMed@upei.ca)).***