

Critical Periods in your Puppy's Life

By Pat Renshaw

Puppies go through 'stages' in their mental development, much the same as human kids. The first seven weeks are the responsibility of the breeder; to make sure that the puppies have a good start to life, physically and mentally. I will summarize from the beginning so that you will better understand how your puppy develops, mentally.

First Period (birth - 3wks)

Starting with birth through three weeks, the puppy's basic needs are food, sleep, warmth and massage. His body thermostat is not sufficiently developed, so he has no control over his temperature. Mentally, the pup is insulated from his environment. He cannot see nor hear. There is very little difference in his brain waves awake or asleep. The puppies have reflex response only to hunger, cold, touch and elimination. Pups will 'pig pile' for warmth. Pups whine and cry, swing their heads from side to side, crawl forward and backward, but do not venture far from Mama. Eyes will not open until between 10-19 days of age. However, he cannot see when they do. The puppies do not follow moving objects and do not startle at rapid movements. Around 18 days, they may get up on wobbly legs and walk.

Second Period (fourth week)

The puppy's basic needs are food, sleep, warmth, his mother, canine socialization with his littermates, socialization with humans on a limited basis, and an unaltered environment. The puppies should experience gentle handling by humans. An attachment to humans is beginning to form. During this period, negative events can bring the inborn characteristics of nervousness to light. Negative happenings can create shyness and other unwanted qualities in a puppy. Once these traits have developed, they will be difficult, if not impossible, to erase.

All senses are functioning now; the pups can see, hear, smell, taste and feel. A loud noise or fast movement will cause the pup to startle. Before now, the puppies were insulated from their environment emotionally, but now, suddenly, they can see and hear and discover that the world is a very scary place, filled with strange noises, movement and contrasting shades of light and dark. Unless this period is handled with care, they can become so emotionally upset, it will remain for life. However, common sense should prevail. While the puppies do need a carefully controlled environment at this time, they also need gentle human contact.

Third Period (5-7 weeks)

The puppies are beginning to form attachments to people, and they are now able to recognize people. By giving individual pups attention away from the litter and his mom, he learns that he is an individual. He is probably experiencing the beginning stages of the "social pecking order" within the litter, and the personal attention will help him to counterbalance the dominance

expressed over him by some of the other puppies.

Training is begun in simple terms now. He is learning now, whether he is formally being taught or not. He is forming bad habits, now, OR he is learning to learn, now. Studies have shown that regularity, rather than length of time or frequency of intervals, of human socialization is very important at this stage.

At this point, the puppies will begin to wander out of their nest to evacuate. This natural tendency to want a clean den makes housebreaking a breeze at this stage. It is now time to start feeding the puppies from a dish, but not to remove Mama. Her presence is important during this time as she will begin to discipline the pups. Most puppies need to be taken down a peg or two at this age. Their teeth are sharp and they get carried away with their play. If the mother is removed - then the human must supply the discipline.

Again, the puppy is learning to separate people and dogs. He is learning he is a dog and he is learning to get along with other dogs (learning greeting patterns, submissive and dominant gestures and all important play gestures).

The social order is established within the litter during this period.

The puppies begin play fighting, as well as actual fighting, primarily over food. By seven weeks, the pup has an adult brain - he only lacks experience. Puppies will recognize different people and respond to voices. By the fifth week, the puppy has become accustomed to his environment and is well adjusted.

This is also a good time to introduce lead breaking. The puppies will pull and tug on the line, but it will accustom them to the feel and weight of something around their necks. This is also an excellent time to place the pups on a table and gently examine teeth, ears and caress the feet. By handling the feet and gently stroking, the puppy becomes accustomed to his feet being handled. Your vet will appreciate the time you take to do this when you get your puppy home. As the puppy progresses, he has been introduced to nail trimming. Brushing has been introduced as well.

Fourth Period (8-12 weeks)

This is the time when you are going to take over! It is an awesome responsibility...what this puppy becomes as an adult dog, will be a direct result of what you do (or don't do) now! It is probably the most important time in your dog's developing life. It's the time that breeders fear the most. It is time for the puppy to leave us and we have NO control over what you do with or to your puppy at this point in his life. We can only guide you and pray that you listen and understand the importance of this stage of your puppy's development.

Studies have shown that prior to eight weeks of age, a pup will continue to approach a person, even though that person frightened or hurt him the previous day. Upon reaching the eighth week and being frightened, he will remember and will be afraid of the person and try to avoid contact with them. You should avoid exposing the puppy to new experiences that are frightening to him at this stage in his development.

If he is frightened at something - and it isn't necessary for YOU to understand why he's frightened - he just is; reassure him that all is well but... be matter of fact about it; don't coddle him using a goofy voice to tell him it's okay. Just tell him, "It's okay. Let's go. Good boy." Once you've reassured him, carry on as if there's nothing there. He will naturally look to his human pack leader for reassurance and direction. It's your job to teach him that he has no reason to be frightened.

The puppy's instinct to follow (the beginning of the pack instinct) comes into being now. The pup's ability to form a strong bond of attachment and devotion is greater during this period than at any other time of his life. That doesn't mean that he must be fussed over constantly or coddled, but to help achieve this bond, he needs good care and individual attention - times of play and loving. A dog does not see all humans as one species of animal; a child is totally different from an adult; a young adult is completely different from an elderly person. He must meet all types of individuals. Children, as well as adults, as well as elderly folks, as well as other animals in the family or neighbourhood. If you do not have children, borrow some from the neighbourhood. Introduce one child, then gradually add several. Do not allow the puppy to pull or chew on the kids. Have the child offer the pup toys, play gently with the pup and, if necessary, correct the pup gently. His introduction to people during this period will determine his later socialability and emotional outlook towards humans. His fondness (or fear) of people will permanently affect how he accepts training and direction from you - the pack leader. The importance of close supervision during all contact with people during this time cannot be emphasized strongly enough. You must make sure that NOTHING occurs to cause negative conditioning.

After eight weeks of age, the puppy should gradually be introduced to the "big, wide world". He should be taken for short walks, short rides in the car, introduced to strange new objects. Even the common household garbage bags can be frightening unless you've been properly introduced! He should see and smell everything within his reach. He should learn that bicycles are not to be feared, or noises from cars, household appliances, doorbells, telephones - all the other hundreds of new and exciting and funny things that are making up his strange new world! During this period, he is capable of accepting and understanding gentle, but firm, discipline. By discipline we mean that all important word, "NO!" - which in reality should be the only negative word he learns. He can accept mild corrections for failure to obey the "no" command. You can continue with his housebreaking. His developing pack instinct will keep his total attention on you, the pack leader. At this time, training is so simple you will vow to begin training every puppy you ever acquire at this age!

Even more important, what he learns during this time will remain with him for life and become a basic part of his personality and his acceptance for training throughout his lifetime. His leash training should be completed during this period. Remember to always be positive and constructive. What he is learning during this period will shape his entire attitude. Everything related to training should be done in a positive manner. During training sessions, praise correct behaviour; gently chide for incorrect behaviour and gently show him once again what you expect. Remember - he may not understand what you want, yet. After all, English is not his

native language! Hollering at him will not make him understand any better! Be patient. Be gentle. If you find you are losing your cool, end the session and leave it until tomorrow when you're feeling more positive. Towering over the pup (you're pretty tall to a puppy!) and screaming at the top of your voice frightens the wits out of him. If you scare him enough, you may find that you have to start at square one. If you just pack it in for the time being and continued tomorrow, you'll be shocked to see that the amnesia that he suffered the day before is cured!

All your training should be done away from distractions and should be fun... for both of you! You are now teaching him that he can be a co-worker, with you. If there are no distractions, his attention will be focused only on you. If you are planning to do obedience work with your dog, now is the time to begin retrieving. Actually, the fetch test is used by Guide Dogs for the Blind to determine how willing a pup is going to be to work for man. They consider this test extremely important and have found that pups that do not fetch willingly NEVER become reliable guide dogs.

The only restraints at this time should be the puppy's crate or necessary fencing to keep the puppy in his kennel or bed area. The puppy should not be tied outside or left tied anywhere during this time ... or at any time, for that matter! DO NOT isolate the puppy from people! Your daily training sessions will provide ample contact with humans - but this can create "single person" socialization - a dog who accepts one person, but is shy with others. For this reason, it is important to introduce him to other people. The puppy is now learning, by association chains; show him what to do and he will learn to do it. The natural pack instinct develops and he will willingly follow a human leader if the opportunity is provided and if it has been made clear that the human is the leader!

He is now learning at an accelerated pace. Because environmental influences create such a big impression on him, this is the best time for man to step in and mold the puppy into exactly the kind of dog he wants. He will never be as pliable as he is during this period. His body sensitivity is increasing rapidly and hard, physical punishment should be avoided. All puppies tend to mirror their human families.

If the family is noisy and active then, chances are, that the pup is going to be noisy and active too! Conversely, if the pup is raised in a quiet, calm atmosphere, he is probably going to be the same type of dog. It is important to understand that if you want your puppy to be gentle and loving as an adult, he must be treated gently and lovingly as a puppy. If the pup is always greeted when the owners return home with excited cries of, "Hello puppy! What a good puppy! Blah. Blah. Blah.", then the puppy is going to be overly excited each time his family returns - which leads to jumping and running wildly through the house. While the pup should certainly be greeted, it should be done quietly, gently and lovingly. The same applies to leaving the house. Just leave. Put the puppy in his crate or 'safe' area, and leave. Don't make a big deal of it thereby making the puppy anxious about your leaving. Remember, English is not his first language; he doesn't understand WHAT you say. He does, however, understand HOW you say it - your tone of voice relays guilt, anxiety, joy, goofiness, unhappiness, etc. Your TONE of voice is your best training tool - good training, bad training or indifferent. Careful how you use it!

Fifth Period (13-16 weeks)

The puppy's basic needs now are training and love, discipline, socialization to humans and other dogs/animals. Disciplined behaviour can be expected and enforced now. While training is still done in a positive manner, mild corrections for misdemeanours can be introduced. Caution is advised as the pup's attitude toward training can become very negative if you're too hard on him. As long as you know that the puppy knows what you are asking him to do, your method of training should be, and must be, positive, gentle - but firm. Your commands are not requests to obey - they are commands. Withholding praise can be just as effective as negatives - shame, bad dog, etc.. All praise must be delivered with feeling rather than a monotone, "good dog."

Now is the time that the "flight" instinct develops - the pup cuts his teeth, and his apron strings (like the teens in kids!). He will wander from the 'nest', and will try to assert his dominance over the human pack members.

Since the flight instinct begins to develop during this period, it is imperative that the puppy learn the recall BEFORE this age. He must have obedience to that command so ingrained in his mind that he is unaware that he has any option except to come when called. The one very important thing to remember with the recall - NEVER chase him. You won't catch him anyway and when he finally slows down a bit to give you half a chance to catch up, you'll be so furious by this time that when you do finally get the dog (and it will be his choice, not yours!) you'll be ready to murder him! Let's look at this.

If you call and he wags his tail and bounds off in the other direction, clap your hands to get his attention, whistle and run like mad AWAY FROM HIM. He'll be so surprised, he'll wonder where you're going, turn heel and race up to you. When he does, and you've been calling his name all the while you were running away, when you grab on to his collar, tell him what a GOOD BOY he is! I know you won't want to (you'll be ready to kill him!), but see this from the dog's point of view.

You called - he heard you, but he decided he would trot off in the opposite direction. You called, clapped your hands. He turned to look at you. You are now running away from him. This is not how the game is played! So he better catch up to you. That's what you wanted in the first place, so he's a GOOD BOY. Even though at the outset of this scenario he was a "bad boy", he doesn't know that - and now he's come to you, so he's good! Get it? NEVER, NEVER, NEVER! call the dog to you for punishment. If the dog requires punishment, you go to the dog. If you call him to you, then give him a sound swat, he will think twice about coming to you the next time. They aren't that dumb! If you expect the dog to come to you every time you call, and you praise the dog when he does, eventually he'll just do it, because you expect it and it's always been pleasant. A note here; dog training is a physical thing. It is not for the lazy!

Since this is the age for getting into mischief, he must be restrained to avoid injuring himself and to keep a new owner from deciding that the pup is "just too much of a monster to keep." He is cutting teeth and will chew EVERYTHING in sight. He must be given plenty of chewable items of his own, and confined when he cannot be supervised. Many times, owners have returned home to find the coffee table listing to one side because one leg is now 1" shorter

than the rest! Or the arm of the chesterfield is mauled beyond repair! Worse yet, people have returned home to find a dead puppy. Electric cords snaking around behind the chesterfield or chair look pretty inviting to a puppy, but it could be the last thing he chews!

He will now begin asserting dominance in subtle ways, such as chewing on your hands, grabbing pant legs, or refusing to obey a command that he knows well. This must be dealt with immediately, as it occurs, and firmly (not cruelly). He must understand that he can be confident around and with humans, but he can never be the boss over a human being. He must know and understand that throughout his life, the human is the top of the social ladder.

The Juvenile Period (the teens)

At about 6 months of age, your puppy reaches his "teens". This is where he starts to 'level out'. He knows the routine of the household; he knows what is expected of him; he knows what to expect from you; he knows that you're the boss. The leveling out takes until he's about 9 months of age. He's still a puppy yet, albeit a fairly large one, and although he knows the rules, like all teenagers, he needs to be reminded every now and again. But, essentially, by the time the dog is 9 months old, what you see is what you get. If he's a nice, quiet, responsive dog, you've done all the right things and he'll remain so, mellowing with maturity. If he's a nice, huge, wild maniac - you've done something terribly wrong! Worse, unless you do something about your attitude, he'll remain this way!

Remember your dog will become what YOU make him. Puppies take work - but only for a relatively short time, and then you're home free! After the learning stage, the following 12-15 years are a constant joy for you, the rest of the family and the dog!

Good luck!

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