



Puppy Development and Socialization

Puppies go through many stages as they grow and mature. The more you understand about each stage, the more you can help your puppy grow to be a happy and well-adjusted adult dog.

Puppy Growth Stages

Here's what to expect at different stages of your puppy's growth.

Newborn puppies are essentially helpless: they're blind, deaf, and dependent on their mother for everything. In this stage, puppies have limited control of their own movement and can't regulate their body temperature, but they do have their sense of touch and taste.

Between two and four weeks of age, puppies' sense of sight, hearing, and smell begin to develop. Their physical coordination improves and they begin to explore more. Their teeth erupt. Their strongest influence continues to be their mother and littermates, but interaction with people--gentle handling, getting used to the sights, sounds, and smells of a human household--is important as well.

From three to 12 weeks, puppies are in their most critical socialization period. They continue to learn about bite inhibition and social skills from their mother and siblings, and they go from just beginning to take in solid food to being completely weaned.

This is the period when puppies need positive experiences of all kinds of things so that they won't be afraid later: being handled all over by humans; meeting people of all different types, including babies, kids, adults, people wearing uniforms or funny hats, people on bicycles and in wheelchairs, and more. (See more about socialization in the next section.)

This is a good time to begin positive training with your puppy, in a puppy class, with a good trainer, or on your own.

Between about four and seven months of age is the teething stage. During this stage, puppies will chew--and chew and chew. Chewing is a normal and necessary behavior for a growing dog, so puppies need to have appropriate and safe chew toys available to them at all times.

Between about five months and 18 to 24 months, puppies turn into adolescents. Adolescence is when dogs are likely to begin testing boundaries and figuring out their place in the family, which will include human and other animal members. If your pup is not spayed or neutered, they will become sexually mature and are more likely to display the behaviors that come along with that, such as more territorial marking.

Adolescence is the time to continue your positive training and keep your boundaries and expectations clear to your now "teenage" dog.

Socializing Your Puppy

One of the most important aspects of puppy development is socialization. A puppy who is well-socialized has a better chance to become a confident, friendly adult dog.

Pups begin to learn social skills from their early experiences with their mother and littermates as well as with humans. A puppy separated from their mother and siblings early won't learn the important lessons dogs teach each other about bite inhibition, appropriate play, and social communication. Puppies should stay with their mother and siblings until at least 8 weeks of age, and preferably until they are 10 weeks old.

Once your puppy leaves the litter and comes to live with you, it becomes your job to continue the socialization process. You should spend plenty of time interacting with your puppy regardless of their age, but the first few months are especially important. Time spent feeding them, petting them, and playing with them helps them learn the social skills they'll use all their lives.

It's also critically important to make sure your pup gets exposed to many kinds of people and other dogs during their critical socialization period (before they are 12 weeks old). Social isolation at this critical stage could permanently damage your puppy's temperament.

Until your puppy has had all their vaccinations, you'll want to limit this exposure to "safe places" – for instance, your house and the houses of friends. But within those constraints, be creative! Invite people for a Meet-the-Puppy party. Take your dog with you when you visit friends. If you have a pet-friendly workplace, that can be a great place to bring your puppy for some human interaction.

Have your friends give the puppy treats while petting and holding the dog. Get your puppy used to being handled in "hot spots" like the paws, ears, muzzle, tail, and rear end by associating gentle touch in those areas with rewards. Make sure that people who meet the dog, especially children, don't get too rough or loud. Keep the experiences positive.

As the pup's confidence grows they may also enjoy games like chase or tug-of-war with various people. At this time you can also begin to get them accustomed to strange noises, sudden movements, and other scary things associated with people like bicycles and wheelchairs. Introduce these gradually and watch carefully for signs that your dog is becoming overwhelmed. If your dog cowers or refuses to take treats, decrease the excitement until they're comfortable again.

For additional information, see these handouts:

- "Puppy Behavior: Chewing"
- "Puppy Behavior: Nipping, Biting, and Playing"

Another great resource is the book [Before and After Getting Your Puppy](#) by Ian Dunbar. This book is available online, in most bookstores, and in the Sacramento SPCA retail store.

For more information on behavior and training for dogs and cats, please visit our web site at www.sspca.org/pet-carebehavior/.