



BEHAVIOR  
SERIES

# Understanding Your Puppy's Behavior and Development

**W**ELL-SOCIALIZED DOGS ARE MORE LIKELY to have well-socialized puppies. Pups often mirror their mothers' calm or fearful attitude toward people; this is a normal part of their socialization. But you can play a vital role, too, by petting, talking, and playing with puppy to help him develop good "people skills."

Puppies are usually weaned at six to seven weeks, but are still learning important skills as their mother gradually leaves them for longer periods of time. Ideally, puppies should stay with their littermates (or other "role-model" dogs) for at least 12 weeks.

Puppies separated from their littermates too early often fail to develop appropriate social skills, such as learning how to send and receive signals, what an "inhibited bite" (acceptable mouthing pressure) means, how far to go in play-wrestling, and so forth. Play is important for puppies because it increases their physical coordination, social skills, and learning limits. By interacting with their mother and littermates, puppies explore the ranking process (who's in charge) and also learn how to be a dog.

Skills not acquired during the first eight weeks may be lost forever. While these stages are important and fairly consistent, a dog's mind remains receptive to new experiences and lessons well beyond puppyhood. Most dogs are still puppies, in mind and body, through the first two years of life.

## Stages of Puppy Development:

### *0–2 Weeks: Neonatal Period*

- Puppy is most influenced by his mother.
- Senses of touch and taste are present at birth.

### *2–4 Weeks: Transitional Period*

- Puppy is most influenced by his mother and littermates.
- Eyes open, teeth begin to come in, and senses of hearing and smell develop.
- Puppy begins to stand, walk a little, wag tail, and bark.
- By the fourth or fifth week, eyesight is well-developed.

### *3–12 Weeks: Socialization Period*

- During this period, puppy needs opportunities to meet other dogs and people.
- By three to five weeks, puppy becomes aware of his surroundings, companions (both canine and human), and relationships, including play.
- By four to six weeks, puppy is most influenced by littermates and is learning about being a dog.

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- From four to 12 weeks, puppy remains influenced by littermates and is also influenced by people. Puppy learns to play, develops social skills, learns the inhibited bite, explores social structure/ranking, and improves physical coordination.
- By five to seven weeks, puppy develops curiosity and explores new experiences. Puppy needs positive “people” experiences during this time.
- By seven to nine weeks, puppy is refining his physical skills and coordination, and can begin to be housetrained. Puppy has full use of senses.
- By eight to 10 weeks, puppy experiences real fear involving normal objects and experiences; puppy needs positive training during this time.
- By nine to 12 weeks, puppy is refining reactions, developing social skills with littermates (appropriate interactions), and exploring the environment and objects. Puppy begins to focus on people; this is a good time to begin formal training.

### **3–6 Months: Ranking Period**

- Puppy is most influenced by “playmates,” who may now include those of other species.
- Puppy begins to see and use ranking (dominance and submission) within the household (the puppy’s “pack”), including humans.
- Puppy begins teething (and associated chewing).
- At four months of age, puppy experiences another fear stage.

### **6–18 Months: Adolescence**

- Puppy is most influenced by human and dog “pack” members.
- At seven to nine months, puppy goes through a second chewing phase, part of exploring territory.
- Puppy increases exploration of dominance, including challenging humans.
- If not spayed or neutered, puppy experiences beginnings of sexual behavior. (Spaying or neutering your puppy at an early age will likely increase the health benefits of the surgery and increase his lifespan.)

Adapted from material originally developed by applied animal behaviorists at the Dumb Friends League, Denver, Colorado. ©2000 Dumb Friends League and ©2003 The HSUS. All rights reserved.

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