



OPPORTUNITY
BEHAVIOR **BARKS** TRAINING
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RESOURCE GUIDE

Puppy Developmental Stages

It's a good thing puppies are so adorable because they sure are a lot of work. While those tumbling balls of fluffy cuteness have the power to soften the hardest of hearts, a puppy can also exasperate the most saintly and patient owner.

Puppy owners can expect to experience sleep loss, peed and chewed-on items, momentary regret ("Why did I bring this chewing/peeing/nipping monster into my home?"), as well as the laughs, adoration, and pride ("Yessir, my puppy is the cutest/smartest/friendliest dog ever to be born!"). Knowing what to expect as your pup develops won't prevent you from ever being tired or frustrated, but it sure can help a new puppy owner gain some perspective.

Puppy development does parallel human development in some ways while diverging significantly in others. For one, puppies develop at warp speed compared to human infants! During the first 5 months alone, pups go through Neonatal, Transitional, Socialization, Juvenile (and the beginnings of) Adolescent developmental periods. Of course, despite this template, every pup is an individual that may/may not mature exactly according to the guidelines. While owners don't necessarily need to become experts on early development, it sure is helpful to understand how normal development affects your pup!

The Socialization Period

3 WEEKS TO APPROXIMATELY 3 MONTHS

Once your puppy's eyes and ears have opened to the world around him, he'll be absorbing with all his senses and learning a great deal about social relationships from living with mom and his littermates. This critical window- it's difficult to tell precisely when the critical socialization period transitions into the next stage is the time when your pup should have many safe and positive experiences with people, sounds, surfaces, and sights. Although socialization is a never-ending development throughout the course of a dog's life, this is the puppy's most impressionable period for developing good feelings about humans. As early as three weeks, breeders/puppy raisers should be routinely handling dogs daily to develop their ability to be handled with minimal stress while also building their coping mechanisms to "recover" from bouts of being restrained, rubbed or cupped and held upside down.

Part of a pup's natural exploration of the world during this time includes puppies nibbling and nipping on just about everything, including you. Biting at your hands is normal, but you can begin to give pups over 8-weeks-old some feedback about the strength of their bite by yelping and briefly ending play when pressure is painful. Praising your dog for gentle hand licks, as well as feeding him his kibble by hand are excellent ways to encourage a softer mouth. Social interaction and maternal care from weeks 7-12 can be so important to the big picture of our pup's behavior. In addition to pups being weaned at this time, they also should be experiencing the appropriate reprimands from mom to set limits that communicate that the milk bar is officially closed. Also, exposure to stable, mature adult dogs is priceless- this helps our pups model appropriate behavior and learn boundaries from mentor dogs.

The Juvenile Period

APPROXIMATELY 3-5 MONTHS

During this stage of development, your puppy may become a bit more independent as he explores the world. Your puppy will still be nipping and chewing, and your goal is to help him gradually learn how to modulate the strength of his jaws (an essential skill called bite inhibition). Every week of development at this stage may be met by an increased sensitivity on your part, so that pup learns to be progressively more gentle. Preventing a predictably nippy puppy by teaching him to self soothe with long-lasting chewies, or redirecting a nippy puppy to appropriate toys is something you'll do repeatedly (keeping a level head as you go about it). This is also a good time to start establishing some "rules" for playing with toys in puppy-safe areas. Toy play is a great bonding and teaching experience, but toothy toy misses that end up nipping human skin should abruptly cause the attention and fun to end! Leaving the room swiftly and decisively is a great message, but make certain your pup is in a puppyproof zone.

Your puppy is also ready to start a reinforcement-based puppy class or lessons where he can continue a carefully structured socialization process and learn foundational manners. Although many owners are concerned about taking their puppy to class before all the vaccinations have been completed, the risk of serious infection is extremely minimal. In fact, the American Veterinary Society for Animal Behavior [AVSAB] published their position statement advocating that puppies be properly socialized prior to being fully vaccinated. You can read more about the position statement [here](#).

