

# Stages of Canine Development

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Critical Periods in Canine Development

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Drs. Scott and Fuller were the first to document critical periods in the development of the canine in 1953. Their efforts, recognizing critical developmental periods, the importance of socialization, the use of the puppy aptitude test and an effective breeding program, resulted in the remarkable success rate of over 90 percent in producing guide dogs for the blind. Clarence Pfaffenbeiger, Dr. Michael Fox and Joachim and Wendy Volhard have further documented and supported the results of Scott and Fuller.

Critical periods in a dog's life begin at birth, peak between six and eight weeks, and extend to maturity. It has been proven that environment and socialization make lasting impressions on the developing dog.

Breeders have an important responsibility to provide socialization and richness of experience for puppies in their care, this is especially important from the fourth to eighth weeks of puppyhood. Pfaffenberger in his book "The New Knowledge of Dog Behavior" states that from "three weeks of age, when the learning stage began, to 16 weeks of age, the character of a dog is formed. No matter how good his inherited character traits, if they are not given a chance of expression during this period he will never be as good a dog as he could have been."

## **Neonatal Period - 0 to 13 Days**

During this time the puppies require food and warmth. They are not capable of regulating their body temperature or eliminating without their mother's stimulation. They are aware of direct contact.

Dr. Michael Fox conducted a study showing mildly stressing puppies during the first five weeks develops dogs which are superior when put in learning or competitive situations. They are better able to handle stress, are more outgoing and learn more quickly. Mild physical stress at an early age will actually increase the size of the brain.

Some of you may have seen an article in the "Hunter's Whistle" recently, an interview with Brittany breeders Ron and Dot Stevenson. They have 30 years of experience producing numerous dual champions. They believe puppies who are destined for a lifetime of competition must be acclimated to stress at an early age and they put their pups under stress from the moment of whelping. They give the pups daily individual attention and emphasize socialization.

The type of stress we are talking about is very mild during the first week. Weigh the pups daily, placing them on a cool surface. On successive days hold them one at a time firmly on one side for 10 to 15 seconds. The next day, hold them on the other side, then up in the air, head down,

turn in a circle, etc. During the second week, the stress is intensified by pinching the ear flap, the webbing between the toes and placing them on a cookie sheet just out of the refrigerator.

### **Transition period - 13 to 21 days**

Puppies' ears and eyes will gradually open. They will begin to hear and will respond to taste and smell. This is the time to introduce novel stimuli to the whelping box such as a plastic milk bottle, knotted towel, cardboard box, etc. How about pheasant or quail feathers? I find it best to put them in a small cloth bag.

This is also a time to introduce puppies to friendly cats. It is important to continue picking up the pups daily, admire them, talk to them, and spend a few minutes with each one individually.

### **Awareness Period - 21 to 23 Days**

This is an important subperiod of the Canine Socialization Period. By 21 days the pups have the use of their senses and it is important not to overload them. Radical changes in the environment must be avoided, i.e. do not move the whelping box!

It is a time of very rapid sensory development. Individual attention is continued. Also, take them two at a time to new floor surfaces for about two minutes. Take different pairs each time. Each day introduced a new surface such as concrete, linoleum, wood, carpet, matting, etc. Taking them two at a time will make it less stressful than one at a time. Very mild auditory stimuli is introduced, such as a radio playing quietly.

### **Canine Socialization Period-21 to 49 Days**

Pup learns he is a dog during this period. He must be kept with his littermates and dam during this entire period. He will learn how to stop mother's discipline by acting submissively. Do not wean the puppies at this time. They may be supplemented at three weeks but it is left up to the dam how much nursing is done. A puppy removed from its litter and dam during this period may become overly noisy, a discipline problem, or a fighter. The mother is allowed as much time with the pups as she wants.

During, the fourth and fifth weeks, puppies can go two at a time for short car rides. Again, alternate puppies and do not always take the same two together. The dam can go along if she is a good rider. Household noises are gradually increased, radio, dishwasher, TV, hair dryer, vacuum, etc.

Individual attention is out of sight and hearing of the mother and littermates. Puppies can be stood and brushed with their bites checked daily. Introduce them to stairs (one step at a time). Put them in a position where they have to solve problems, walking through tunnels, for instance. Individually, let them drag a show lead around. You don't want another puppy to grab the lead-no tugging. Put a crate in the puppy pen.

At five weeks obedience training can begin in a totally positive fashion. Give five minute sessions on sit, stand, down and leash training. Use a plain buckle collar and do not pull or jerk the leash. Introduce the pups to the outdoors. This is a good time for them to meet new adults and children.

During the fifth and sixth weeks individual attention is imperative. Clarice Rutherford and David Neil state in their work "How to Raise A Puppy You Can Live With", that during the sixth week, "It would be a catastrophe if you neglected to give each pup individual attention. It puts you in the category of being a producer, not a breeder and you should never again have another litter in your care."

The 49th day is the ideal timing for the puppy aptitude test to be done. The brain waves of the puppy are the same as a mature dog, but the puppy is a clean slate. If the puppies have been properly socialized and are not somehow traumatized before the test (by being taken for their first car ride to the test site, or being crated for the first time) the test is a reliable measure of their suitability for whatever role in life they are expected to fulfill. It is an excellent aid in placing puppies in compatible homes.

### **Human Socialization Period 50 to 84 Days (7 to 12 weeks)**

This is the best time to place a puppy in his new home, since he is now ready to transfer his affections from his dam to his people. Pfaffenberger says, "From now to the 16th week of the puppy's life, his basic character is set by what he is taught. This will apply especially to his attitudes toward people and toward his ability to serve them the very best he can." Socialization must be continued.

During this time the puppy is given widely varied experiences and meets as many people of all ages and walks of life as possible. Once a puppy is reasonably housebroken, I take it to the bank, hardware store, pet shop, florist, playground and everywhere possible with me. During the seventh week is a good time to send a puppy the breeder plans to keep for an overnight visit with a trusted friend. By ten weeks, puppies should have separate living quarters, or at least separate sleeping quarters if they are still in the same household.

### **Fear Impact Subperiod 8 to 10 Weeks**

Experiences a puppy perceives as traumatic during this time are generalized and may affect him all his life. It is a fact that a dog is most likely to develop an avoidance response if subjected to physical or psychological trauma during these four weeks.

Puppies should not be shipped during this period, elective surgery should be put off until the 12th week, and necessary visits to the vet should be made fun. Bring toys and ask the vet to play with pup for a few minutes afterward.

### **Seniority Classification Period - 12 to 16 Weeks:**

Otherwise known as the "age of the cutting" teeth and apron strings during this period, the pup is trying to figure out who is boss. If still together, there is intense competition between littermates. All tests of strength between person and pup (such as tug of war) should be discontinued. All biting of human hands, clothing, or leash should be discouraged. By 16 weeks, the puppy's emotional makeup is fully developed and cemented for life, barring desensitization.

### **Flight Instinct Period 4 to 8 Months:**

There is a time during this period, lasting two to four weeks, when the pup will test his wings. He won't come when called, in fact will run away. Just keep pup on a leash until this passes.

### **Second Fear Impact Period 6 to 14 Months**

This period is otherwise known as Teenage Flakiness! In large breeds this period could extend longer since it is tied to sexual maturity. Incidents may occur more than once. This is a fear of new situations and is handled with the utmost patience. The dog is encouraged to work it out on his own. If anything, it is better to ignore the whole situation than to reinforce the fear by praising the dog or petting him while he is afraid. When you "reassure" a dog with pets and "it's okay, fella", you are telling him it is okay to be frightened and you are creating a potential problem.

### **Young Adulthood - 18 to 24 months:**

Many dogs will show a rise in their level of aggression during this time. They may become protective and territorial, and may make a new attempt to dominate owners. Incidents of teenage flakiness may recur.

To produce a potential "super" dog takes a great deal of time and effort on the part of the breeder and new owner. The above is an outline which will help those who have the time and who wish to give their puppies every possible chance of preparing to take the world by the tail and achieve their greatest potential.

For those who have less time to spend with a litter, this can serve as a guide helping maximize the quality of the time spent and to pinpoint the best times during the pups' development to make the effort.

The absolute, bare minimum amount of individual attention a puppy must have is as follows: Two minutes of attention two times during the fourth week; ten minutes of attention two times during the fifth week; a minimum of two ten minute sessions the sixth week; and one-half hour once per week from 7 through 16 weeks.

Surely we all want to invest more than the bare minimum on our litters of puppies whose pedigrees we have so carefully planned and whose futures are so filled with hopes of bench, obedience and field titles. Let's give our puppies a super start from the whelping pen!

**References:**

*Clarice Rutherford & David H. Neil. MRCVS. "How to Raise a Puppy You Can Live With." Loveland, CO: Alpine Publications, 1981.*

*Clarence Pfaffenberger. "The New Knowledge of Dog Behavior." NY, NY: Howell, 1979.*

*Wendy Volhard & Gail Fisher. 'Seminar: "All You Ever Wanted to Know About Puppies and Dogs."*