

Your Puppy's First Year

Understanding a puppy's stages of development during the first 12 months can help you create a stronger, richer relationship with your new companion. This section addresses what to expect during the first year and provides tips for socialization, housebreaking and other general information.

Birth to 7 Weeks

Puppies develop very quickly during their first weeks. Born with minimal senses intact, puppies can begin to see, hear, and smell at around five weeks. Using their newly developed senses, they become aware of their environment and begin to interact with their mother, litter-mates and people. They also begin to wean, and, thanks to their new, baby teeth, eat solid food.

Ages 7 to 9 Weeks

Most puppies are brought home at around eight weeks. To prepare for the addition of your new pup, be sure to "puppy-proof" your home so your curious puppy can't hurt himself during his explorations. Keep him away from household dangers such as electrical wires and outlets, plants, pools, balconies, and open doors.

A great way to protect your puppy from getting into dangerous situations when you can't watch him is by introducing him to a crate. A crate is a smart tool that helps in housebreaking and helps keep him safe. Most dogs love the security of a crate. Because they are descended from animals that live in dens, a crate is a natural shelter for a dog because it has the same characteristics of a den. Your pup will see it as a safe haven. Gently introduce him to the crate by placing it where the family is most active. Line the crate with a soft towel, then put his food, treats and toys inside while leaving the door open to make him understand this is his special place.

Be cautious of socializing your pup outside your home until he has been given all his initial shots (normally 4 sets), otherwise he may be susceptible to catching potentially fatal diseases. A nursing pup receives antibodies from his mother's milk that protect him from viruses and diseases. These antibodies begin to dissipate at around seven weeks, leaving the pup (weaned at about five weeks) vulnerable to disease. Therefore, puppies are given their first vaccination at six to eight weeks, with booster vaccines given at 10 to 12 and 14 to 16 weeks; the final booster usually includes a rabies vaccine. Check with your veterinarian about the best vaccine protocol for your puppy.

Because your puppy may seem to be fearless at this stage, introducing him to new situations is important from the moment you bring him home. Be cautious, however, as introducing a pup to too many new stimuli may be stressful for him. Be sure to praise him when he handles a new situation well.

Walk your pup on different surfaces (carpet, grass, roadways), take him for frequent outings, play games and then pet him quietly when he has settled down. Introduce him slowly to all types of appropriate interactions with people, animals, and new sights, sounds and smells.

At some time during these weeks, your once bold puppy may become cautious. If he reacts in fear to loud sounds or sudden movements, don't overreact. Continue to gently introduce him to new situations. For example, when taking him to the vet, keep the experience positive (lots of love and praise) Try to minimize any unnecessary procedures.

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Avoid becoming overly protective or isolating your puppy. Choose activities that can be controlled. Take small steps as you expose him to new experiences. Your puppy will eventually return to his confident self. Help him get there by setting a good example—the more relaxed you are, the calmer he will be.

Ages 9 to 12 Weeks

Your puppy can increasingly comprehend basic education, such as housebreaking, leash training, and knowing his name. Such interactions teach him canine manners and which behaviors are appropriate for which times. Reinforce your puppy's desire to play with you and your family. This will allow him to replace the bond he had experienced with his mother and litter-mates with the bond he is creating with you and your family.

Housebreaking is a major hurdle for most puppy owners. Remember, prevention and patience are key. Give your puppy ample opportunities to “go” outdoors so he doesn't get into the habit of “going” indoors. A general rule of thumb in housebreaking is to take him outside any time he experiences a significant change of activity—when he wakes from a nap, after vigorous playtime, after he eats or drinks, and when there is an exciting event such as someone visiting your home.

As your puppy grows, he needs to know who is in charge. If no one is telling him what the rules are, he will make up his own rules. Some ways you can get your young puppy used to you as his leader include bathing and grooming, putting on and removing a leash, leaving him alone for short periods of time, and, while he's eating, taking away and then returning his food bowl.

Ages 13 to 16 Weeks

Let the teething begin! Now your puppy will start to chew on anything available, including you—which should always be discouraged. When your puppy tries to chew on you, have a toy nearby to put into his mouth. Praise him when he takes it. As with a teething baby, providing frozen chew toys helps to sooth your pet's aching gums.

Increasingly, your puppy will need strong leadership from you so he always knows that the people in your home are the ultimate leaders. Further challenges at this age occur when your puppy shows increased independence and stubbornness.

Keep learning fun for your puppy. He'll learn more if he enjoys his lessons. Try to keep training sessions to about 15 minutes at a time. If you or he get frustrated (remember, he is a puppy!), just stop, play a game, and then try again with an abbreviated lesson followed by lots of praise.

Now is the perfect time to take your puppy to “puppy kindergarten” to allow him to socialize with other dogs and people in a safe, controlled environment. Your puppy will enjoy playing with other puppies of similar age while getting a start on basic obedience training. By socializing him in a controlled, positive environment, you can mitigate potential behavioral issues in the future. Be sure that your puppy has had all his shots before you begin to socialize with strangers.

Always give clear, consistent commands. This ensures your puppy will readily make the connection between your command and what you want him to do.

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Ages 16 to 24 Weeks

This is a time of rapid growth for puppies. If you have a highly energetic pup, it may seem natural to exercise him as much as possible. However, don't overdo it—his developing bones and muscles aren't ready to take the strain, especially in larger dog breeds. Because he is developing an increased sense of social structure, he may test his boundaries to determine his ranking in the family order, including the possibility of trying to assert himself over children.

At this age, too, hormones begin to take over. Your puppy's "sexual behavior" may become quite noticeable. Thus, this is a good time to have the puppy spayed or neutered. Spay/neuter surgery not only reduces unwanted litters of puppies, but actually ensures a healthier life for your puppy. Your puppy will have a decreased risk of mammary and testicular cancer and will be less likely to run away. Consult with your veterinarian about spay/neuter surgery for your pup. Also, check for low cost spay/neuter offers from your veterinarian.

Ages 6 to 12 Months

Your puppy is now an adolescent ("tween-ager"). He is exuberant and full of life. While he may have physically developed into an adult-sized dog, he is still a puppy. He will continue to need your consistent guidance.

To manage his energy and curiosity, consider expanding his activities to include agility training and increased outdoor games and experiences. Introduce him to more people and dogs in your neighborhood or at doggie day cares. Your continued efforts with socialization and training, supported by lots of affection, will ensure your once tiny puppy matures into a loyal, loving companion for many happy years ahead.