

Canine Behavior Imprinting Stages

by Carl Cappolino

Dogs, regardless of breed, all pass through various stages as they grow and develop, physically, mentally and psychologically. Optimal canine behavior begins with breeding healthy, sound, stable dogs of excellent temperament, then providing the correct environment and nurturing to allow that behavior to properly manifest. Dogs always "tell the truth" -- any compromises always show up. There are ten identifiable unique stages, each affected by previous stages and what occurred in those earlier stages.

Every stage is important because behavioral imprinting is taking place that will affect the dog for the rest of its life.

Being aware of what is happening and when it is happening can make a good dog a great dog, and avoid potential behavioral issues that may never be fully resolved if allowed to reach a particular threshold. When dogs are young they learn a great deal that will have a lasting impact. In fact, sexual patterns which emerge as puppies can be affected by early experiences.

The Neonatal Stage (birth – 2 weeks)

Puppies are mostly influenced by their mother at this time. Having a sound mother is essential. Nothing can replace a good mother; the information in this article is based on the premise of a sound bitch. Not all mothers are the same. The breeder/owner must be aware of the interaction between the mother and her puppies, ready to adjust and adapt to the environment as required by the constantly changing situation.



Puppies respond to sensory information including touch, taste and temperature. Imprinting is taking place even at this early stage. A single-ton puppy, one which is the only puppy born to a bitch, faces a number of issues as a result of being the only pup in the box. Typical problems include lack of bite inhibition, inability to get out of trouble calmly and graciously, inability to diffuse social tension, inability to handle frustration, lack of social skills, lack of impulse control, and touch sensitivity.

Transitional Stage (2 - 4 weeks)

Maternal influence continues as a dominant factor in development, as well as interaction among littermates where the rudiments of canine socialization are taking place. Eyes are open and teeth are erupting while hearing and smell are developing. Puppies are beginning to stand, walk, wag and bark.

Puppy Toddler Stage (3 - 6 weeks)

By four to five weeks sight is well developed. During this time puppies need opportunities to learn from each other, their mother and people. Puppies that are removed from their mother and littermates too early tend to be nervous, more prone to barking and biting, and less responsive to discipline. Often they become more aggressive to other dogs.



While playing with each other and the mother, puppies learn what different body postures mean and how they affect the mother and littermates. This practiced behavior is teaching the acceptable social protocols of being a dog. Weeks three to five are a time when they become aware of surroundings, companions, both canine and human, as well as social relationships and play. During weeks four to six pups are most influenced by their littermates and are developing the fundamentals of what it means to be a dog.

During this time it is essential that the pups experience positive interaction with humans. This is vital imprinting period for the human experience. While playing, they learn and practice what difference body postures mean and how they affect their mother and littermates. This includes what it is like to bite and be bitten, what barking and vocalization mean, and how to make and use them to establish social relationships with other dogs.

The mother teaches the puppies basic manners and they learn to be submissive to her leadership and what behaviors are acceptable.

Socialization Stage (7 – 12 weeks)

Rapid learning occurs during this stage. Learning that occurs at seven weeks will have a life-long impact. Everything they come in contact with will make a lasting impression on them as it never will again. And, not only will they learn, but they will learn whether or not they are taught. Although the puppies have a short attention span at this time, what they learn is learned permanently and resistant to change.

This is an important period in a puppy's development. Unfortunately it is also a period when many breeders sell their puppies. Responsible breeders should do everything possible to properly socialize and imprint the puppies to ensure sound temperament and stable character.

Some professional breeders and trainers subscribe to the "rule of sevens" for their seven week old puppies. They make sure their puppies experience seven different: types of people, types of walking surfaces, temperature, environments, varieties of sound, types of dogs, etc. etc. For example puppies who are gradually introduced to loud machinery, honking cars or children squealing at play from remote distances and gradually getting closer will not balk, be startled or possibly snap when encountering these situations as they mature.

From seven to nine weeks puppies are refining their physical skills and coordination, including house training as they fully develop their senses.

Fear Imprint Period (8 -12 weeks)

Any frightening, painful or traumatic experience during weeks eight to twelve will have a more lasting impact on puppies than they will at any other time during the dog's life. During this time they can experience real fear. If improperly vetted "normal" objects and experiences can elicit fear and anxiety. This might include: a sudden loud noise, bad experience at a vet, an aggressive older dog, or a child running up and grabbing the puppy.

Careful supervision, along with gradual introduction and acclimation to new things (i.e. "rule of sevens") and continual positive experiences



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with human interaction, touching and handling are absolutely critical.

At ages nine to twelve weeks pups are refining their reactions, social skills and interactions with littermates while they are exploring the environment, spaces and objects. Puppies are beginning to be more aware of and starting to focus on people, making this a good time to begin training. Now is the appropriate time to start setting rules while behaviors are easy to establish. Pups need to learn how to interact with humans and other animals with which they will live, and make the transition to the human environment. Careful shaping and molding from their owners is vital at this stage.

Ranking Period (12-16 weeks)

During this time the puppy is going to begin to test the owner to determine who is going to be the pack leader. They will bite in play or as a real challenge to authority. Such behavior is natural in the pack and not necessarily undesirable. At his time it is important that human owners establish their position at the pack leader and not just another sibling. Puppies will continue to demonstrate behaviors to take charge. They may include teething, mouthing, and grabbing at the leash.

The ranking between dominant and submissive within the pack will take place. This includes humans. Continuing to play with the puppy is important, but the relationship between the owner and play must change. No mouthing of the owner's body should be allowed, since playmates now include another species, humans.

Adolescence Period (4 - 8 months)

This is the time when puppies are more likely to venture off on their own and become more independent of their owners. For anyone who has raised children this will sound very familiar.

Puppies that have always come when called or stayed close to their owners will now ignore them and often run in the opposite direction. This adolescent experience can last from weeks to months. It, as with prior stages, must be addressed. The puppy's refusal to come, stay or sit will determine whether or not it will be trustworthy off the leash. Patience, consistency, timing and motivation are essential to avoid the development of inappropriate behavioral patterns during this period.

Sexual Maturity (5 - 18 months)

Generally, the larger the dog, the longer it will take to physically mature. Sexual maturity can occur in smaller dogs as early as five months. In larger breeds, it can start as late as nine to ten months. In giant breeds, sexual maturity may not take place until twelve to eighteen months. Some breeds can remain adolescents until they are two and half or even three years old.

This is a key period for continued training and establishing the human as the pack leader. It is also a time when the dog is a member of both the human and the dog pack.

It is also important to note that dogs go through a "second chewing phase" during months seven to nine.

In male dogs, adolescence is manifested by classic behavioral changes. Scent marking is stimulated by the release of testosterone into the dog's system. Males become less friendly and even somewhat more aggressive to other males. They may begin lifting a leg in the house, become very interested in girls, tend to roam and not be particularly interested in listening to their owner.

Females experience the onset of the heat cycle, estrus. During this three week period they can become pregnant. Bitches exhibit erratic behavior during estrus. Some get moody and insecure; others

become bold and aggressive. Typically bitches will seek a male when ready to mate, and let him know in no uncertain terms if they are not ready.

Second Fear Imprinting Period (6 -14 months)

As dogs sexually develop they also go through a second fear imprinting stage. This seems to be more common in males. This second fear imprinting period is similar to that which occurred during the socialization period, but is much less defined. It is sometimes referred to as "adolescent shyness."

A dog may suddenly become reluctant to approach something new or suddenly become afraid of something familiar. It can be a very frustrating time for the owner and difficult to understand because the onset is sudden, and seemingly unprovoked. If this behavior is noticed, two extremes should be avoided. Do not force the dog to do, or to approach something that is frightening to him, and do not coddle or baby the dog. Again patience, consistency, timing along with desensitization are the rule of thumb to move through this stage.

Adulthood (18 months - 3 years)

Adulthood is a time when dogs may again test your position as the pack leader and may be more aggressive and assertive. They may become more territorial and protective. Tempering these behaviors with appropriate limitations and guidance is mandatory.

This is a time when everything they have learned during earlier stages of development may manifest with less than desirable behavior. For example puppies separated from their littermates too early often do not develop appropriate social skills. They may not have learned how to send and receive the appropriate signals; what is an inhibited bite, who is in charge and what are the acceptable behavioral parameters.

Good behaviors that have been taught and imprinted in the dog will remain that way if consistently reinforced and nurtured. Less than desirable behaviors can, in most cases, be resolved and improved. All behavior must be managed.

As stewards of dogs' lives, the breeder and eventual owners have serious responsibilities to the animal and the community. This is a lifelong commitment that begins with making a decision to understand how dogs learn, how they develop and how we as humans must never compromise any aspect of the process for expediency or convenience. It starts with breeding only healthy, sound representatives of a breed and not sacrificing an excellent temperament for anything else. ■



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Sources: Burch & Bailey, How Dogs Learn (1999), Wiley Publishing, Inc.

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