

CRITICAL PERIODS THE KEY TO PRODUCING SUPER DOGS!

By Ellen Dodge

Does your dog hide under the bed when the vacuum cleaner comes out? Knowledge of critical periods would have prevented this from happening. Breeders and owners can not only prevent environmentally caused problems, they can enhance, the, learning potential of their puppies with this knowledge.

Drs. Scott & 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 a puppy aptitude test and an effective breeding program resulted in a remarkable success rate of over 90% in producing guide dogs for the blind. Clarence Pfaffenberger, Dr. Michael Fox and Jack & Wendy Volhard have further documented and supported the results of Drs. Scott & Fuller.

Critical periods in a dog's life begin at birth, peak between six and eight weeks, and extend to emotional maturity. It has been proven that environment and socialization make lasting impressions on the developing puppy. Breeders and puppy owners have an important responsibility to provide socialization and richness of experience for the puppies in their care.

Since a dog's basic personality is set by the time a puppy is sixteen weeks old, socialization to dogs and people is a major priority until that time. Any problems that arise as a result of a lack of socialization can usually be desensitized, but it takes time. Investing the initial time for socialization is a lot more fun and prevents problems from developing.

Socialization is a big priority until the pup is at least sixteen weeks old, but also needs to be a regular part of the dog's entire life, especially until emotional maturity (1 1/2 to 3 years).

NEONATAL PERIOD (0 TO 13 DAYS): During this time puppies require food and warmth. They are not capable of regulating their body temperature or of eliminating without their dam's stimulation. They are aware of direct contact. They are not able to retain learning.

Dr. Michael Fox conducted a study showing that mildly stressing puppies during the first five weeks develops dogs that 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.

We are talking very mild stress here. During the first week weigh the pups daily placing them on a cool surface. The first day hold each puppy gently down on one side for 10 seconds. The next day hold it down on the other side. On successive days hold it up in the air, upside down, turn them in a circle, etc.

During the second week place the pup on different surfaces, carpet, linoleum, a cool cookie sheet. TRANSITION PERIOD (13 to 21 DAYS): The 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, or pheasant or quail feathers tucked into a small cloth bag for sporting breeds. It is important to continue to pick up the puppies daily, admire them, talk to them, and spend a few minutes with each one individually.

AWARENESS PERIOD (21 TO 28 DAYS): This is an important sub-period of the Canine Socialization Period. By 21 days the puppies have the use of their senses and it is important not to overload them. It is a time of very rapid sensory development. Radical changes in the environment must be avoided. This is not a good time to move the whelping box - leave it right where it is!

Individual attention must be continued. Take the puppies two at a time to new floor surfaces for about two minutes. Take different pairs each time. Each day introduce a new surface such as cement, linoleum, wood, carpet, matting, etc. Very mild auditory stimuli can be introduced, such as a radio playing quietly.

If pups have not already started to meet new people and children, this is the time to start -gently and low key.

Puppies are now able to begin retaining what they learn.

CANINE SOCIALIZATION PERIOD (21 TO 49 DAYS): Puppies learn they are dogs during this period. They must be kept with their dam until they are at least five weeks old, and with their littermates through this entire period, until seven weeks old. They will learn how to be submissive to their dam, and will learn an inhibited bite reflex from their littermates ("If I bite too hard my brother won't play with me").

A puppy removed from the litter during this period is more likely to become overly noisy, lack an inhibited bite reflex, or have other behavior problems including dog or people aggression.

The dam should be allowed to spend as much time as she wants with the pups until they are seven weeks old. She may wean them whenever she is ready, and will appreciate it if the breeder begins feeding the puppies "gruel" at about 3 1/2 weeks.

During the fourth and fifth weeks puppies can go two at a time for short car rides. Again, alternate puppies, don't always take the same two. Their mother can go along if she is a good rider (they will learn a lot from her behavior in all situations- she is their role model). Household noises can be gradually increased, radio, dishwasher, TV, hairdryer, vacuum, etc. Individual attention should now be out of sight and hearing of the dam and littermates. Puppies can be stood and brushed, and their bites checked daily.

Introduce the puppies 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 light leash around. You don't want another puppy to grab the leash - no tugging! Put a crate into the puppy pen.

At five weeks, obedience training can begin, in a totally positive fashion. Train for five minute sessions on sit, stand, down and walking on leash (Use food treats liberally). Use a plain buckle collar and do not pull or jerk the leash. Introduce the pups to the outdoors. Pups can continue to meet friendly dogs, new adults and well-supervised children.

During the fifth and sixth weeks, individual attention is imperative. The puppies should be given at least ten minutes of individual attention twice during the fifth week and twice during the sixth week.

The 49th day is the ideal time for the Puppy Aptitude Test. The brainwaves of the Puppy are the same as a mature dog, but the puppy is a clean slate. The aptitude test is a reliable measure of the pup's dominance level toward people, which is an excellent aid in placing pups in compatible homes. It also identifies suitability for obedience competition and/or the rigors of breed or field competition.

If the puppies have not been properly socialized or if they are somehow stressed before the test the test results will not be accurate. Pups will be stressed if they have been given vaccinations recently, or if they are taken for their first car ride to the test site, crated for the first time, or outdoors for the first time, for example.

HUMAN SOCIALIZATION PERIOD (50 TO 84 DAYS or 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 and littermates to his people.

From the seventh week to the sixteenth week the puppy's attitudes, especially toward people and toward working will be set by what he is taught.

From seven to twelve weeks the puppy should be given widely varied experiences and meet as many people of all ages and walks of life as possible. Once a puppy is reasonably housebroken he can be taken to the bank, hardware store, pet supply store, florist, playground, etc., etc.

During the seventh week is a good time to send a puppy the breeder plans to keep on an overnight visit with a trusted friend. This will substantially increase the puppy's self-confidence.

By ten weeks, littermates should have separate living quarters, or at least separate sleeping quarters if they are still in the same household.

FEAR IMPACT SUB-PERIOD (8 TO 10 WEEKS): Experiences a puppy perceives as traumatic during this time will be 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 three weeks. Puppies should not be shipped during this period; elective surgery should be put off until the twelfth week; and necessary visits to the vet should be made to be fun. You can bring treats and toys and ask the vet to pay with your pup for a few minutes before and after the treatment.

Think about how many puppies go to their new homes with they are eight weeks old and are overdosed on vacuum noises during their Fear Impact Sub-period. Vacuuming can still be accomplished, but just do it one room at a time while your pup is 8 to 10 weeks old. Then stop and leave the 'vacuum monster' out where the pup can investigate it between 'roars.'

SENIORITY CLASSIFICATION PERIOD (12 TO 16 WEEKS): Otherwise known as the age of cutting - teeth and apron strings. If still together, there will be intense competition between littermates. Games of possession and strength like "tug-o-war" and "keep away" should be discontinued. Play games of cooperation like "hide & seek" and "retrieve."

By sixteen weeks, the puppy's emotional makeup is fully developed and cemented for life, barring desensitization.

FLIGHT INSTINCT PERIOD (4 to 8 MONTHS): There will be times during this period when pup will test his wings. He won't come when called, in fact, will run away. (Keep pup safely on leash until this passes.)

SECOND FEAR IMPACT PERIOD (6 to 14 MONTHS): Otherwise known as teenage flakiness. In large breeds this period could extend longer (up to 2 years or more) since it is associated with maturity. Incidents may occur more than once. This is a fear of new situations, or even old things that appear different to the dog for some reason. (Like the Weimaraner who growled at a houseplant, or the Rottweiler who almost attacked the bowl of artificial fruit when it was moved from the dining room table to the kitchen counter!)

Be very patient when this happens. The dog should be allowed to work it out on his own. If anything, it is better to ignore the whole situation, than to reinforce the fear by reassuring the dog or petting him while he is afraid.

YOUNG ADULTHOOD (1 1/2 TO 2 YEARS): 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 their owners. Males may temporarily start lifting their leg in the house. Incidents of teenage flakiness may recur.

An understanding of critical periods and the importance of early and continuous socialization will help us produce canine companions who are at their best in all situations at all times. This is imperative with dog owners increasingly coming under fire from anti-dog legislation. In addition, critical periods are a key to producing show, obedience and field dogs better able to withstand the stress of sometimes intense competition; they are our key to producing super dogs!

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