

Coping with adolescence



As puppies, dogs need us to care for them and they work hard to keep our attention. However there may be a marked change in their character when they reach puberty (juvenile period) around 4-5 months, and then again when they reach adolescence between 6-14 months. This is a very difficult time as it seems that all your hard work may have gone out the window, the dog may seem rebellious and disinterested. As all the hormones associated with reproduction start to circulate, their priorities change to investigating the environment and everything in it. The puppy becomes more independent and exploration becomes more of a priority than you. Also around this time your dog could go the other way and lose a bit of confidence. Research suggests that the socialisation period in young dogs is much longer than previously thought. It does not end at around 13 weeks but extends into the juvenile phase. This means puppies are continuing to learn throughout their first year of life and beyond. This questions the practice of rushing a very young puppy through a long list of new things by the time they are 3 months old. However adolescence is a passing phase and eventually they will reach maturity. Depending on the breed, smaller dogs tend to mature at a year old whereas larger dogs may not reach full maturity until they are three years old.

Associated problems

Recall and other dogs

You may have problems with your dog not coming back when called when out walking when previously recall hasn't been a problem. The dog's priorities have changed and are more interested in exploring, sniffing and finding out who has been where. Adolescent dogs tend to have the energy and vigour of an adult but have not yet got the benefit of experience and tend to get into trouble. It is a good idea to use a long line and harness in places where temptation may be too great, still allowing them the freedom to explore but keeping them safe—having success in roaming off can lead to a lifetime's learned behaviour.



Trouble with other dogs may arise around this time also, because your dog is finding out about other dogs and trying to learn the skills they will need as an adult. It is a good idea when out walking to put your dog on a lead until you have reached the other dog to check if they are friendly and can play with yours before letting them off to play. This way your dog is learning that they stay with you until they have been given permission to go off

and play and you are there to intervene if any situation arises (See 'Advanced training: Recall' handout for more details).

Barking and worried by things on a walk/in the home

During adolescence, dogs can enter a secondary fear period between 6 and 14 months, in large breeds this can extend longer as it is associated with sexual maturity. Some dogs will show a rise in their levels of reactivity e.g. aggressive displays such as barking when frightened or startled. These bouts in behaviour correspond with growth spurts and therefore may happen more than once as a puppy matures. If there have been lots of changes around this time, this can exacerbate this behaviour. Your dog may suddenly be apprehensive about new things or shy and timid of new people. Fear of situations must be handled with patience. In the event of aggressive displays, provide space not correction. Your dog needs time and to feel safe to build their confidence.

Associated problems (Continued...)

Adolescent chewing



All dogs have a need to chew throughout their life as we discuss in Workshop 1. Commonly you will see an increase in chewing at 7 –12 months of age and can last for 6 months.

You may be providing chew items but they are still chewing on items they shouldn't be. Chewing these items is not done out of spite and punishing your dog will not be effective in solving the problem. It will lead to dogs only not chewing things when you are around, including things they should be chewing.

If you return home and they have chewed something they shouldn't, again punishing your dog will only cause them more anxiety because you become unpredictable and untrustworthy.

Adolescent dogs may have this uncontrollable urge to chew for several reasons:

- Discomfort of their adult teeth settling in.
- Calming and stress management, chewing, tearing, licking and gnawing releases endorphins which have a calming effect on your dog and are important for physiological regulation. Many dogs chew to relieve stress, anxiety and tension. This doesn't necessarily mean your dog is anxious but chewing calms them and makes them feel better.
- Boredom e.g. if you have a working breed with naturally high energy levels, they can become easily bored which can lead to destructive behaviour.
- Separation anxiety, because as mentioned, chewing makes dogs feel better.
- Attention seeking e.g. they learn that chewing the TV remote makes you get up and chase them which to your dog is a fun game.
- Unbalanced diet as we discuss in workshop 1.
- The dog has toys but doesn't have a range of suitable safe chew items.

What can be done

If you are experiencing difficulties during this period it is tempting to socialise your dog more or do more with them. However this can be counter productive. Revisit making sure all their needs are met e.g. Their bolt hole and team leader role is established, they are getting enough sleep and quiet time (see Dog welfare factsheet). Also go back to basics with choosing quiet areas outside your home to practice your training. Avoid potentially overwhelming situations and keep things as consistent as you can with the same routines.

What can be done (Continued...)

Revisit your gradual introductions tick list from workshop 1 and anything you are experiencing problems with add onto your list. Remembering the essentials of working through your checklist:

- You are not asking anything more of the dog other than to 'look and learn'. Keep exposure time short, building it up slowly, there is no rush.
- **Remember the 4 Fs.** Check your dog has access to an escape route, this may be their safe space or if they are on the lead that they have plenty of slack.
- If the dog is using their escape route or safe space repeatedly and is reluctant to come back and engage with what you are doing, the challenge is too difficult. You will need to start at a lower level. If your dog is showing extreme avoidance please contact us for more detailed advice.
- If your dog is voluntarily coming back, is curious and is willing to interact, the challenge is at the right level for your dog.
- Try not to lure them closer to things that they are unsure of with food but reward them with a treat and calm praise for approaching it in their own time.
- Add to your list throughout the dog's life with things they may not have seen, revisit things they haven't seen in a while. Perhaps stick it on your fridge?

Make sure their mental and physical needs are still being met, using interactive toys, and brain games. Where you may be struggling to keep dog and child interactions calm, use such activities to encourage calm behaviour around children and focus the dog onto appropriate activities.

Regardless of whether you are experiencing problems with chewing, have a range of chew items available (we discuss these in workshop 1- see 'Equipment list' and 'Feeding your dog' handouts for more details).

As mentioned, chewing is important for all dogs. Rotate chew items so they keep their novelty and have a variety of textures available. Use KONGs and safe chews for settling your dog for quiet time when you are there and when being left alone to help them relax. You may also pick times of day where your dog may be more active to focus them onto a calm activity instead.

If they are chewing things they shouldn't, you will need to either redirect and praise correct chewing, ensure there is no access to those items, and teach your dog to 'leave'. Be proactive with not leaving anything out that they shouldn't have and making sure they get plenty of opportunities to chew. Children may become very upset if their dog destroys a favourite item so it is another thing to consider when taking on a young dog.



What can be done (Continued...)

Remember the three golden rules:

1. **Reward behaviour you do want,**
2. **Ignore behaviour you don't want and**
3. **If you can't ignore it teach something incompatible.**

So if you catch them chewing something they shouldn't swap it for something they can have and if they pick up their own items on their own accord, reward with gentle praise. (See 'Basic training: Teaching leave it' handout for more details).

As mentioned, dogs may show destructive behaviour when left alone; as well as management techniques described above it is also advisable to work through a separation anxiety programme (see 'Separation anxiety' handout for more details) with your dog to ensure they learn it is ok to be left alone.

If you are struggling with lead work and recall, again see Advanced training: Lead work and Recall hand-outs on the members area. These give you more specific guidance on how to deal with distractions, such as other dogs and people.

The main thing is not to give up, carry on being very consistent and keep going with their training. It may seem like there's not much going in but once they start to mature you should start to see snippets of what the dog will be like in the end. Your hard work will pay off when everything just suddenly seems to click into place. Remember to contact us if you need specific support or advice.