A black and white photograph of a puppy, likely a Weimaraner, looking into a dark metal bucket. The puppy's head is lowered into the bucket, and its front paws are visible on the ground. The background is a plain, light-colored surface.

THE


FIRST

YEAR

Our guide to
your puppy's
development
from birth
to 12 months.

By Denise Flaim

KAREN MCMILLAN/VIZSLA



Compared to our human version, canine childhood is an eyeblink. Dogs can eat on their own at one month, procreate at six, and achieve their full size by a year, if not earlier.

The first year of a dog's life is punctuated by milestones, which arrive in quick succession at first, then space out as the dog coasts toward adulthood. Here are some pivotal ages for physical and behavioral changes in your growing puppy, and how you can best prepare.

Birth and early development

Prenatal. Human parents who play classical music to their unborn offspring hope to mold their personalities before they even leave the womb. Although no one is advocating that breeders blast Mozart, some experts say that a mother's reactions and interactions may indeed imprint on her puppies.

"I think things start happening before the puppies are born," says American Kennel Club judge and puppy expert Pat Hastings of Aloha, Ore., who has evaluated thousands of puppies for dog-show breeders and performance enthusiasts. "I think the calmer the mother, and the more time people spend talking to her, the calmer the puppies are."

First week. Newborn puppies are basically furry blobs: They can't see or hear, and their entire mission in life is to suckle and sleep. Still, Hastings says, some breeders who want to instill resilient temperaments swear by "early neurological simulation" exercises.

In these brief daily sessions, which only last from three to five seconds, puppies are exposed to mild stimuli — such as being tickled between their toes with a cotton swab, held on their backs, or placed on a cold hand towel.

"These tiny things stress but don't overstress them," says Hastings, who adds that she has seen a difference in her own Doberman Pinscher litters, with puppies who grow up to be impervious to working in bad weather.

Two to three weeks. At this critical juncture, puppies develop eyesight and hearing. Some progressive breeders capitalize on these newfound senses by introducing clicker training, a system of positive reinforcement that equates a click with a reward, then marks desired behaviors with that click. In these earliest training sessions, a breeder will click to mark the return of the mother for feeding.

"I can tell you the minute I pick up a puppy if it was clicker-trained in the litter box," says Hastings, noting that clicker-trained puppies never resist her handling, but rather are "wired" to figure out what they can do to please her — and earn their reward. By contrast, she says, "the dumbest puppies, bar none, are those raised on wire-bottom pens [common in puppy mills]. They just stand where they are, pee and poop, and nobody teaches them anything."

Four weeks. By this time, puppies can begin to be weaned off their mother's milk, and are the canine equivalent of toddlers. As they get increasing control of their bodies, they begin to play, bark, and discover toys.

Five weeks. Though puppies at this age are still too young to leave their siblings, they can start to be housetrained and learn simple commands, such as Sit. Again, use a positive training method such as clicker training to encourage problem solving and exploration in these impressionable young minds.

Six weeks. Social learning is now in full swing, and puppies are literally learning how to become a dog from their mother and siblings, picking up vital behaviors, such as bite inhibition. Puppies removed from littermates at this age often are clueless about how to interact with their own species.

Leaving the nest

Eight weeks. This 2-month mark is the universally accepted age at which puppies can go to their new homes. If they are kept with their littermates much longer beyond this point, "they start forming such strong bonds that sometimes they don't form great ones with humans," Hastings says.

The exception to the rule, she continues, are toy dogs, which frequently are kept by their breeders until 11 or 12 weeks of age, "until they are strong enough" to leave the nest.

Eight to 16 weeks. Trainers and behavior experts point to this eight-week window as a crucial time for socialization and exposure to new experiences. During this juncture, the puppy is developing a mental filing cabinet of what is "normal" in the world around him. The more positive and non-threatening exposures he has to new people, places, and things, the better he will be able to cope with change and stress as an adult.

"Ideally, you want to have your puppy meet 100 new people a week in five new locations from the time you bring her home until she's 16 weeks old," says Jill Marie O'Brien, Certified Pet Dog Trainer — Knowledge Assessed, the former director of behavior and training at the Los Angeles SPCA. "Even if that means you have to walk her down the line of people waiting for tickets at the movie theater."

Many trainers also strongly recommend puppy kindergarten for puppies as young as 8 weeks so they can interact with other dogs in a controlled environment. Remember that interactions must be positive: Overwhelming your puppy with too



exuberant children and unruly dogs can have a negative effect.

Another caveat: The veterinary recommendation that puppies be kept home until they complete their shots at 16 weeks directly contradicts the need for heavy socialization during this crucial period. Many owners mitigate risk by arranging visits and playdates at homes where they know the resident dogs are fully vaccinated, or enroll in classes that employ preventive measures, such as sanitizing floors before class.

Four months and older. Younger puppies are usually easy keepers. Content to follow their owners around, many housetrain easily and quickly learn new commands like Sit and Down.

But don't get lulled into a false sense of security. "At about four months, puppies wake up," explains certified dog trainer Teoti Anderson of Lexington, S.C., author of *Your Outta Control Puppy* (TFH Publications, 2003). "They can smell things they didn't smell before, hear things they didn't hear before. That puppy that you had off leash like a little angel suddenly dashes across the street because he sees a squirrel."

As dramatic changes continue in their bodies — this is around the time puppies begin teething — puppies can go through "fear periods," developing sudden, unexplained fears of perfectly ordinary objects or familiar people. "It's normal, and doesn't mean your puppy's a freak," Anderson says. Treat the behavior matter-of-factly and calmly, reward any movement toward or interest in the newly feared object, and soon this too shall pass.

O'Brien adds that owners of purebreds or identifiable crosses should keep their antennae up for breed-specific phases or behavior changes at this age. For example, she says, "Malinois have high hazard avoidance at a very young age, and between 4 and 6 months, you might see lunging and growling at people they don't know when they feel pressure put on them," she says. Labrador Retrievers, by contrast, can begin to get mouthy around 6 months.

"As soon as you start seeing characteristics like that, you need to stop the presses and get the right answers," she warns, before these breed-typical traits become ingrained and unmanageable.

Six months. Improbably early as it may seem, sexual maturity begins to make its presence felt at this age. Females may go into heat (though some may take as long as a year to have their first reproductive cycle), and males begin to respond to their body's growing trickle of testosterone.

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"With the males, you may see more marking, starting to pee where other dogs have gone, and more tendencies to roam," Anderson says. Consult with your vet to determine the best time to spay or neuter. Although 6 months used to be the reflexive age at which these surgeries were performed, your veterinarian might suggest an earlier or later surgery depending on your puppy's needs and health.

Because they tend to reach physical maturity more quickly, toy dog females will often come into heat earlier. Conversely, the larger the breed, the longer it will take for physical maturation.

Seven to eight months. Another physical milestone occurs at this age, as back molars begin to come in and a new round of teething begins. "You might notice puppies are tossing toys in the back of their mouths," Anderson says.

Also around this period, dogs begin to behave as full-fledged adolescents, and no matter how much training you have put in, they can begin to rebel. Anderson notes that it's at this point that older dogs can lose their patience with the "baby" of the household. Similarly, be attentive at dog parks for signs your wild one is ticking off the canine elders of the group.

Twelve months. Hitting the one-year mark doesn't mean your dog is all grown up; that doesn't happen until two years, sometimes beyond. Virtually all dogs reach their maximum height by a year, but their bodies are still growing and their personalities are still evolving.

An exception to the rule is, again, toy breeds. "Toys are adults at about 1," Anderson says, adding that their small size often prompts owners to be too lenient with issues such as housetraining and nipping.

That said, for most dogs the key at this age — and for many months to come — is a lot of deep, calm breathing. "It's easy to look at them and expect some maturity," Anderson says. "But please have patience — they're still just babies." **DF**

Denise Flaim is a DOG FANCY contributing editor and co-author of Rescue Ink (Viking, 2009). She lives on Long Island.

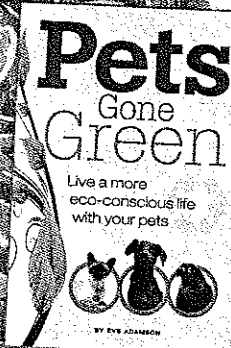
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