

The teenage years: Puppy-proofing and training tips

Surviving puppy adolescence — patience and kindness will get you through

Your adorable little puppy has grown taller and stronger, looking more like a real dog every day. But as they shed their puppy fluff, they seem to have forgotten many of the good habits they used to have. They ignore you when you call them, throws tantrums when they're denied a treat, and bark for no apparent reason. What on earth happened to your perfect little puppy?

Your puppy is a teenager. Don't worry. This too shall pass.

Growing brains

Most puppies hit adolescence around 6-months-old, but it can start later. During this period, your puppy's body and brain are making the transition from puppy to adult dog. Different hormones are turning on and off to control growth and sexual maturity.

Lots of changes are occurring in the brain too. The prefrontal cortex is the region of the brain in charge of self-control, problem solving and social interactions. Just like in human adolescents, the prefrontal cortex in the brain is still developing. This is why adolescent puppies are often more impulsive than their adult counterparts and may overreact to situations. Their brains just haven't fully developed those skills yet. Your dog is figuring out how they fit in the world and refining the mental tools that they need to navigate it.

Adolescence generally ends around 18 months of age, but can go until 2-years-old depending on the breed or dog. Patience will resolve much of the wackiness that comes with a teenage puppy, but there are some helpful tactics for getting through this period as well.

Puppy-proofing your environment

"Puppy-proofing your home is key in keeping the puppy safe and preventing damage to the house," says Behavior Resident Pamela J. Perry '85, D.V.M. '89, Ph.D. '11.

Puppies tend to explore the world with their mouths, and the growth of adolescence allows them to reach places and objects that they couldn't at 10-weeks-old.

Think like a puppy as you walk through your house. What things look like fun to grab or chew on? Move tempting items to secure locations, such as a cabinet, and utilize baby gates to limit where your puppy can roam in the house so you can keep an eye on them.

"Provide puppies with lots of acceptable chew toys to keep them entertained," Perry says.

If your puppy can satisfy their chewing instincts with a proper toy, they will be less likely to gnaw on a stolen shoe or cell phone case.

Crates are a fabulous tool to keep your canine teenager out of trouble. Even if they are perfectly house-trained, that immature prefrontal cortex might not be ready to nix the urge to rip open your couch cushions. Save yourself and your puppy some drama, and put them in a crate when they can't be supervised.

Rules and routines

“Keeping a routine helps puppies adapt to living with us. It also is useful to keep all interactions with puppies as consistent as possible so that they always know what to expect and how to behave,” Perry says. “A simple way of doing so is to teach the puppy to sit before they get anything they want from you. This is the premise of leadership training, aka, the ‘Learn to Earn’ program or ‘Nothing In Life Is Free’ protocol.”

Your puppy likely already knows to sit, wait at the door and go into their crate before you put their food bowl down. As adolescence kicks in, they may challenge some of these rules. Don’t panic. Calmly but firmly remind them what they are supposed to do and be consistent.

For example, if they try to dart out the door every time it opens, set up a gate to prevent access and put them on a leash so you can prevent them from getting outside until they can sit and wait for your release cue. Your naughty puppy isn’t being willful. The idea that they could dart out the door instead of waiting for a release just popped into their head, so they tried it. Firm, but compassionate guidance will remind them what is expected.

Your adolescent puppy may react strangely to exciting situations. Use a simple routine that they know well, such as a series of quick tricks to get their attention back on you and give them something that they can control. Ask them to sit or do a nose touch while quietly standing with you. Give them a treat and praise.

Physical exercise

With that growing body comes increased energy and stamina. Physical exercise can help take the edge off your adolescent dog’s energy, plus it is an opportunity for bonding with you. Take your dog for long walks, or to go swimming, and also allow time for free running in your yard.

Mental stimulation

Exercising your puppy’s mind will wear them out faster than any physical exercise.

This is a great time to review the basic obedience skills they learned as a puppy, especially since their hormones and lack of self-control may have made them “forget.” Experiment with shaping and clicker training to encourage them to problem solve and be creative. Scenting games, such as finding a hidden treat or toy, are another great way to work your dog’s brain and allow them to engage in natural dog activities.

Try to avoid tackling large, complex behaviors all at once. Remember that your puppy’s brain is still developing, and that their hormones are doing crazy things too. Break a new trick or skill into small steps so that your dog can be successful. Even five minutes of training a day can do wonders to help turn a crazy teenage menace into the sweet companion you know and love.

Remember: Adolescence is a time for patience. Your puppy is maturing, and the challenges of this time will pass. (We promise!)

Use your house and training routines to provide structure and predictability. Be consistent with rules. Set your dog up for success by crating them when unsupervised and by puppy-proofing your house.

And if your dog does something truly crazy, try to laugh. After all, you were a teenager once too.

This article has been reprinted with permission from the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine’s DogWatch newsletter, published by Belvoir Media Group. When you [become a member](#) of the Riney Canine Health Center, you will receive a free subscription to DogWatch.

