

# Adolescent dogs

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You attended puppy classes. You taught Sit, Down, Leave it, Come, and Heel. Your dog graduated at the top of her class and has been an angel ever since – until now.

Suddenly, your perfect puppy is a rebel without a clue! She is distracted and hyper, flighty and fearful. She's barking, lunging and having accidents in the house. Worst of all, she seems to have forgotten every scrap of training.

Welcome to adolescence, that rocky passage from playful puppy to independent adult. It's all part of growing up. And although it can be tempting to ignore your teenage dog's bad behaviours, it's best to face canine adolescence head-on. If left unaddressed, puppy-sized predicaments become grown-up grievances.

## WHAT'S GOING ON?

Adolescence is a time of tremendous physical and psychological change for your dog. Although her body may seem full-grown, it isn't. And her brain is anything but.

Signs of early adolescence usually emerge between seven and 10 months of age, but can appear as early as four months. Most behaviour problems appear between eight and 18 months. Your dog may exhibit uncharacteristic and unpredictable behaviours, such as aggression, fearfulness or reactivity. In addition, you may see regressions in chew-training and housetraining and, well, training in general.

## HORMONES RULE

With hormones raging, body changing and brain disengaging, it's no wonder your dog is acting strangely. As adolescent dogs become sexually aware, fluctuations in hormone levels can cause all sorts of disruptions in thinking. Your dog may become distracted outdoors, roaming widely and ignoring you completely. Adolescent dogs begin flirting with members of the opposite sex. They may also exhibit dog-to-dog aggression.

Males begin lifting their leg and marking their territory. Females mark, too, leaving their scent to attract suitors.

This is when accidents may occur in the house. Not only that, your well-behaved dog may begin mounting other dogs, furniture, stuffed animals or even your house guests' legs! These symptoms can be more severe with intact dogs – particularly males – but even spayed or neutered dogs experience "brain-strain" as they cope with adolescence. Of course, un-spayed females will experience their first estrus (heat) cycle, and false (or real) pregnancies could follow.

## GROWING PAINS

Your adolescent dog's body is getting bigger and stronger. She might have reached her full height, but she still has some filling out to do. She is gangly and uncoordinated. Growth spurts are still possible, sometimes accompanied by growing pains, especially in larger breeds.

In severe cases, a visit to the vet may be in order. Your dog might be moody or seem uninterested in her favourite activities.

On the other hand, adolescent dogs often have more energy than they know what to do with. Plenty of exercise is necessary, preferably several times per day.

During adolescence, your dog will develop psychologically, too. She will become independent and may begin to question and challenge your authority. "Sit? You want me to sit? Why? What will you do if I don't?" Remain calm and patient during such episodes. You may need to re-teach behaviours, making it easy and rewarding for your dog to be correct.

Your adolescent dog is also learning her limits with other people and dogs she meets. It is common for fears to arise during this period. Your dog may react with aggressive or submissive behaviours. In both cases, remain calm and unemotional. Resist the urge to punish or coddle, as either will reinforce the behaviour and make it more likely to recur. Ongoing socialization with dogs and people is critical!

## TRAINING AND SOCIALIZATION

Hopefully, you've set a good foundation with your puppy training. Don't stop now! Training and socialization are essential during adolescence. This is the perfect opportunity to forge a deep and lasting bond with your dog, just

when she needs you most. Obedience and dog sport classes are great investments, and both of you will benefit. Employ reward-based training methods and you'll earn the trust, love and loyalty of your best friend.

Socialization must be ongoing. Provide your dog with an ever-changing variety of friendly dogs and people to socialize with. Vary the route, destination and time of your walks. Be sure to socialize at home; invite people and their well-behaved dogs over to visit. It could be good for your social life, too!

## DESENSITIZE

Desensitize your dog to joggers, skateboarders, cyclists, rollerbladers and children running and squealing. Keep your dog leashed and stay well back at first. Reward your dog lavishly for calm behaviour. You must do this before she reacts. In fact, you want to prevent the reaction from happening at all. If you are consistent, you will find your dog becoming more attentive when distractions are present, because she anticipates reward. If your dog makes a mistake and reacts by barking or lunging, remain calm and quickly retreat from the situation. Next time, keep more distance between your dog and the distraction and get the reward in sooner. Remember, if you punish your dog, you will make the problem worse.

Basic training needs lots of review at this time. A rock-solid Recall or a quick Down could save your dog's life. A Sit-Stay is an incredibly convenient thing. Do a few quick obedience exercises daily and remember to reward generously with praise, food or play. With consistent training, the memory loss and selective hearing of adolescence will recede and you and your furry friend will enjoy a rich and rewarding relationship.

In addition to national agility titles and honours, Dr. Brandi Jacques and her dogs have many television appearances to their credit. When she's not working with her Shiba Inu or Belgian Malinois, Brandi is busy as a concert pianist, music teacher, agility instructor and freelance writer.

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