

Your Adolescent Dog (18 weeks to 2 years)

By now you're probably quite exhausted by your puppy-raising efforts. Hopefully, though, you are justifiably proud of your well-mannered, well-behaved, highly socialized dog with dependable bite inhibition. However...

Adolescence is a time of change.

To ensure that your attentive, mannerly and friendly puppy remains attentive, mannerly and friendly throughout adulthood, you need to accelerate socialization and training. Do not take your puppy's stellar qualities for granted. Make a point always to praise your dog when he acts appropriately and to reward him whenever he is exceptionally well behaved.

Your dog needs to meet unfamiliar people on a regular basis. . In other words, your dog needs to be walked at least once a day. Your puppy may be taken for rides in the car and to visit friends' houses as early as you like. From the time your puppy is four months old, walk him on a regular basis — at least once a day. Otherwise, if your dog is confined to your house and only meets the same familiar people over and over, he will desocialize surprisingly quickly and soon grow to be wary and fearful of strangers, especially children and men.

Also, your dog needs to meet unfamiliar dogs on a regular basis. It is a fact of life that not all dogs get along. However, if you gave your puppy plenty of opportunities to play with other puppies and dogs and so develop solid bite inhibition, it is highly unlikely that your dog will injure another dog when scrapping. When dogs have reliable bite inhibition, most dogfights are no more than dog arguments. Continue socializing your dog with other dogs on walks and in parks.

The prime purpose of puppy husbandry is to produce a friendly, confident, and biddable pup, so that you can face the behavior and training challenges of your dog's adolescence, and your dog can deal with the immense social upheaval that dogs, especially males, face as they navigate adolescence. It is much easier to approach doggy adolescence with an already socialized and well-trained dog. However, maintaining your dog's socialization and training through his adolescence can be tricky if you don't know what to expect and how to deal with it.

Behavior is always changing, sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse. Things will continue to improve if you continue working with your adolescent dog, but they will definitely get worse if you don't. Both behavior and temperament will tend to stabilize, for better or worse, as your dog matures around his second birthday for small dogs or third birthday for large dogs. But until then, if you don't keep on top of things, there can be precipitous and catastrophic changes in your dog's temperament and manners. Even when your dog reaches maturity, you should always be on the alert for the emergence of unwanted behaviors or traits, which you must quickly nip in the bud before they become hard-to-break habits.

A dog's adolescence is the time when everything starts to fall apart, unless you make a concerted effort to see it through to the stability of adulthood. Your dog's adolescence is a critical time. If you ignore your dog's education now, you will soon find yourself living with an ill-mannered, under-socialized, hyperactive animal. Here are some things to watch for.

Household etiquette may deteriorate over time, especially if you start taking your dog's housetraining and other good behavior for granted. But if you taught your pup well in his earlier months, the drift in household etiquette will be slow until your dog reaches his sunset years, when housetraining especially tends to suffer.

Basic manners may take a sharp dive when puppy collides with adolescence. Lure/reward training your puppy was easy: you taught your pup to eagerly come, follow, sit, lie down, stand still, roll over, and look up to you with unwavering attention and respect because you were your pup's sun, moon, and stars. But now your dog is developing adult doggy interests, such as investigating other dogs' rear ends, sniffing urine and feces on the grass, rolling in unidentifiable smelly stuff, and chasing squirrels. Your dog's interests may quickly become distractions to training, so that your dog will continue sniffing another dog's rear end rather than come running when called. (What a scary thought, that your dog would prefer another dog's rear end to you!) All of a sudden he won't come, won't sit, won't settle down and stay, but instead jumps up, pulls on-leash, and becomes hyperactive.

Bite inhibition tends to drift as your dog gets older and develops more powerful jaws. Giving your dog ample opportunity to wrestle with other dogs, regularly hand feeding kibble and treats, and periodically examining and cleaning your dog's teeth are the best exercises to ensure that your adolescent dog maintains his soft mouth.

Socialization often heads downhill during adolescence, sometimes surprisingly precipitously. As they get older, dogs have fewer opportunities to meet unfamiliar people and dogs. Puppy classes and parties are often a thing of the past and most owners have established a set routine by the time their dog is five or six months old. At home, the dog interacts with the same familiar friends and family, and is walked, if at all, on the same route to the same dog park, where they encounter the same old people and the same old dogs. Consequently, many adolescent dogs become progressively desocialized toward unfamiliar people and dogs until eventually they become intolerant of all but a small inner circle of friends.

If your adolescent dog does not get out and about regularly and few unfamiliar people come to the house, his desocialization may be alarmingly rapid. At five months your dog was a social butterfly with nothing but wiggles and wags when greeting people, but by eight months of age he has become defensive and lacking in confidence: he barks and backs off, or he snaps and lunges with hackles raised. A previously friendly adolescent dog might suddenly and without much warning be spooked by a household guest.

Puppy socialization was a prelude to your safe and enjoyable continued socialization of your adolescent dog. However, your adolescent dog must continue meeting unfamiliar people regularly, otherwise he will progressively desocialize. Similarly, successful adolescent socialization makes it possible for you to safely and enjoyably continue to socialize your adult dog. Socialization is an on ongoing process.

Dog-Dog Socialization also deteriorates during adolescence, often at an alarming rate, especially for very small and very large dogs. First, teaching a dog to get along with every other dog is difficult. Groups of wild canids — wolves, coyotes, jackals, etc. — seldom welcome strangers into their midst, but that's exactly what we expect of *Canis familiaris*. Second, it is unrealistic to expect a dog to be best friends with every dog. Much like people, dogs have special friends, casual acquaintances, and individuals they don't particularly like. Third, it is quite natural for dogs (especially males) to squabble. In fact, it is a rare male dog that has never been involved in some physical altercation. Everything was fine with young pups playing in class and in parks, but with adolescent dogs, the scraps, the arguments, and even the play-fighting seem all too real.

Fighting

A dog's first adolescent fight often marks the beginning of the end of his socialization with other dogs. Again, this is especially true for very small and very large dogs. Owners of small dogs are understandably concerned about their dog's safety and may be disinclined to allow their dogs to run with the big dogs. Here is where socialization starts downhill and the small dog becomes increasingly snappy and scrappy. Similarly, owners of large dogs (especially the working breeds) are understandably concerned that their dogs might hurt smaller dogs. Here too socialization goes downhill and the big dog becomes increasingly snappy and scrappy. Now we're in vicious circle: the less the dog is socialized, the more likely he is to fight and thus be less socialized.



"He fights all the time! He's trying to kill other dogs!"

The fury and noise of a dogfight can be quite scary for onlookers, especially the dogs' owners. In fact, nothing upsets owners more than a dogfight. Consequently, owners must strive to be objective when assessing the seriousness of a dogfight. Otherwise, a single dogfight can put an end to their dogs' socialization. In most cases, a dogfight is highly stereotyped, controlled, and relatively safe. With appropriate feedback from the owner, the prognosis for resolution is good. On the other hand, irrational or emotional feedback, besides being upsetting for the owner, can exacerbate the problem for the dog.

It is extremely common for dogs, especially adolescent males, to posture, stare, growl, snarl, snap, and maybe fight. This is not "bad" dog behavior, but rather reflects what dogs normally do. Dogs do not write letters of complaint or call their lawyers. Growling and fighting, however, almost always reflect an underlying lack of confidence, characteristic of male adolescence. Given time and continued socialization, adolescent dogs normally develop confidence and no longer feel the need to continually prove themselves. To have the confidence to continue socializing a dog that has instigated a fight, the owner must convince herself that her "fighting dog" is not dangerous. A dog may be obnoxious and a royal pain, but this does not mean he would

hurt another dog. Whereas growling and fighting are normal developmental behaviors, causing harm to other dogs is decidedly abnormal and unacceptable.

First, you need to ascertain the severity of the problem. Second, you need to make sure you react appropriately when your dog fights, and give appropriate feedback when he doesn't.

To know whether or not you have a problem, establish your dog's Fight-Bite Ratio. To do this you need to answer two questions: How many times has your dog been involved in a full-contact fight? And in how many fights did the other dog have to be taken to the veterinarian?

Ten-to-Zero is a common Fight-Bite Ratio for one- to two-year-old male dogs, that is, ten full contact fights with opponents taking zero trips to the vet. We do not have a serious problem here. Obviously the dog is not "trying to kill" the other dog, since he hasn't caused any injury in ten fights. The dog would have caused damage if he had meant to. Moreover, on each occasion, the dog adhered to the Marquis of Dogsberry Fighting Rules by restricting bites to the other dog's scruff, neck, head, and muzzle. Surely, there is no better proof of the effectiveness of bite inhibition than, when in a fighting frenzy, one dog grasps another by the soft part of his throat and yet no damage is done.

This is not a dangerous dog. He is merely socially obnoxious in the inimitable manner of male adolescents. Yes, the dog is a bit of a pain, but he has wonderful bite inhibition (established during puppyhood) and has never injured another dog. Solid evidence of reliable bite inhibition — ten fights with zero bites while adhering to fighting rules — makes it extremely unlikely that this dog will ever harm another dog.

Fights are bad news, but they usually provide good news! As long as your dog never harms another dog, each fight provides additional proof that your dog has reliable bite inhibition. Your dog may lack confidence and social grace, but at least his jaws are safe. He is not a dangerous dog. Consequently, resolution of the problem will be fairly simple. Of course, you still have an obnoxious dog in dire need of retraining, since your dog is annoying other dogs and owners just as much as he annoys you.

On the other hand, if your dog has inflicted serious wounds to the limbs and abdomen of his opponents in just one of his fights, then you have a serious problem. This is a dangerous dog, since he has no bite inhibition. Obviously, the dog should be muzzled whenever on public property. The prognosis is poor, treatment will be complicated, time-consuming, potentially dangerous, requiring expert help, and certainly with small guarantee of a positive outcome. No dog problem presents such a marked contrast between prevention and treatment.

An adult fighter with no bite inhibition is the very hardest dog to rehabilitate, but prevention in puppyhood is easy, effortless, and enjoyable: simply enroll your puppy in puppy classes and take him to the park regularly. Do not wait for your adolescent dog to get into a fight to let him know you don't like it. Instead, make a habit of praising and rewarding your puppy every time he greets another dog in a friendly fashion. I know it may sound a little silly — praising your harmless, wiggly four-month-old male pup and offering a food treat every time he doesn't fight — but it's the best way to prevent fighting from becoming a serious problem.

Preventing Adolescent Problems

Always make a point of praising your dog and offering a couple of treats whenever he eliminates in the right place. Keep a treat container by your dog's toilet area. You need to be there anyway to inspect and pick up your dog's feces (before the stool becomes home and dinner for several hundred baby flies). Remember, you want your dog to want to eliminate in his toilet area and to be highly motivated to do so, even when he develops geriatric incontinence.

Similarly, a stuffed Kong a day will continue to keep the behavior doctor away. Your dog still needs some form of occupational therapy to idle away the time when left at home alone. There is no magic potion and there is no drug that will prevent household problems, such as destructive chewing, excessive barking, and hyperactivity, or alleviate boredom, stress, and anxiety as quickly, easily and effectively as stuffing your dog's daily diet of kibble into a few Kongs.

For your adolescent dog to continue to be reliably obedient and willingly compliant, you must integrate short training interludes, especially emergency sits and long settle-downs, into walks, play sessions, and your dog's other enjoyable day-to-day activities. Maintaining your dog's manners through adolescence is easy if you know how to, but extremely difficult if you don't. You must learn how to integrate training into the dog's lifestyle.

Should socialization ever fail and your dog snap, lunge, or nip a person, you will be thankful that you had the good sense to take your puppy to classes where he learned reliable bite inhibition. Your dog's defensive actions cause no harm but they warn you that you'd better quickly revamp your dog's socialization program and maintain his bite inhibition exercises before it happens again. Which it will. Continue bite inhibition exercises indefinitely. Occasionally hand feed your dog and examine his muzzle and teeth (and maybe clean them) on a regular basis.

The secret to a well-socialized adult dog is at least one walk a day and a couple of trips a week to the dog park. Try to find different walks and different dog parks, so that your dog meets a variety of different dogs and people. Socialization means training your dog to meet and get along with unfamiliar dogs and people. The only way to accomplish this is for your dog to continue meeting unfamiliar people and dogs daily. Praise your dog and offer a piece of kibble every time he meets an unfamiliar dog or person.

And don't forget to maintain your own improved social life by inviting your friends over at least once a week, just to keep them still involved in training your dog. Ask them to bring along somebody new to meet your dog.

Host a puppy party and invite your dog's buddies from puppy class and the dog park. To offset some of the scarier aspects of the dog world at large — adult dogs, big dogs, and occasionally unfriendly dogs — make sure your adolescent dog has regular opportunity to socialize and play with his core companions from puppy school.

Adapted from [AFTER You Get Your Puppy](#) by Dr. Ian Dunbar

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