

CANINE CRITICAL PERIODS OF DEVELOPMENT

(From Gail Fisher The Clicker Training Manual)

All puppies and dogs go through stages in their lives, called critical periods, when the environment has a profound effect on later behavior.

During a critical period, an otherwise insignificant event has a greater impact than that same event occurring at another time. This brief description of some critical periods of your dog's life will be helpful in understanding either how to handle him during these times, or, if your dog is beyond these periods, may give you some insight into his behavior.

CANINE SOCIALIZATION PERIOD - 3-7 weeks

Usually before most people adopt a dog, this period is important for a puppy's socialization.

This is when the puppy learns to use his instinctive behavior -- to recognize and communicate with body language (submissive postures, play invitation posture, fighting behavior, etc.), vocalizations, (growls, yelps, barks), and he learns the "rules" of life. The rules, as taught by his dam (mother), littermates, and other dogs are to listen to and believe body language and to respond to discipline -- an extremely important lesson for our puppies to learn.

SOCIALIZATION PERIOD - 8-16 weeks

The most common age for most of us to get a puppy, and the time for him to learn to live with humans. Puppies are curious, exploring everything, and using their mouths to investigate much the way human babies do.

When he mouths your hand, you can teach your puppy "bite limitation" -- or not to bite too hard. It's important at this time to provide your puppy with lots of new experiences. Take him to visit friends, and have people over to visit him. Take care he doesn't get over-tired or frightened, and that children don't hurt him. A broad range of positive experiences at this age will help your pup grow up to be a well-rounded, stable dog. Lack of socialization can create a dog who is afraid of people or new places.

This is also the ideal time to start formal training, as well as teaching your puppy the 'rules of the home'. Training class presents a pup with the opportunity to meet new people, new dogs, and to experience new environments - the ideal formula for optimum socialization during this period.

FLIGHT INSTINCT - Sometime between 4 & 8 months (usually lasts 2 weeks or so).

Generally occurs earlier in smaller dogs, and later in larger ones.

This period represents the first time the adolescent dog is willing, and even eager to explore the great big world. Often this is the first time your dog doesn't come when you call, and how you handle your dog during this period may mean the difference between a dog who runs away and one who learns to come on command.

If flight instinct occurs while you're attending class, simply keep your dog on leash for several weeks, following the instructions for teaching him to come when called. Anytime he is not safely fenced, keep him on a leash or a long line until you are certain he will come when you call.

FEAR IMPACT PERIOD Between 6 and 14 months (of varying duration)

Also known as "Fear of New and Familiar Situations" period, this time frame is not absolute, and may occur more than once. The Fear Period is recognizable by your dog's behavior. Your dog may exhibit a fear of approaching something new, or suddenly show fear of something familiar. How you behave can make a difference between your dog becoming shy or aggressive, or getting through this time unscathed.

When your dog acts frightened, do not pet him and talk soothingly. Doing so reinforces the fear, encouraging the frightened behavior. Your dog thinks, "When I'm frightened, I get petted and praised. Mom/Dad likes it when I tremble. They're saying it's OK to feel this way."

Do not force him to confront the object of his fear. Doing so will reinforce the fear, and may cause panic. Would you cure a child's fear of monsters by throwing the child in a dark room to deal with them? Of course not. The mere thought sounds heartless and abusive. Don't force your dog to deal with something frightening to him either.

So that's what not to do. How about what to do. Laugh. Yup, laugh. Not at your dog, that would be insulting. Laugh at the object of his fear, regardless of what it is.

Perhaps it's a statue (we once had a dog who became frightened of an antique dog doorstop), or a tree (Christmas trees are common), or a household item (rotating fans, floor lamps and the like -- we even had a dog bark hysterically at a toilet), or a person. Talk in an animated fashion, laughing and having a good time, and your dog will likely overcome his fear and approach the object. In so doing, he will discover that it is not

something frightening.

This fear period is often related to stress due to growth. We have found that nutritional supplements often help overcome this stressful time. If your dog's behavior suddenly changes and he is afraid of familiar or new situations, in addition to controlling your behavior, talk to your instructor about nutritional support to help him through this time.

MATURITY - Between 1 and 4 years

The average dog reaches maturity between one and a half and three. Maturity marks the end of the critical developmental periods. Maturity is not always accompanied by behavior changes. In many dogs, however, maturation may signal an increase or awakening of territorial protection, or aggressive behavior between two dogs who previously got along fine, or by testing behavior with you. Testing may include slower responses such as a sluggish recall or a reluctance to get off the bed when told; game playing, such as not bringing a ball back or playing keep-away; outright refusal such as not giving something up on command, or guarding possessions.

The answer is to review your training with your dog. Follow a training course that puts you in a positive position of leadership without confrontation. If you have a problem related to a challenge for leadership, please speak to your instructor. If a problem occurs after you have completed your training, please call for advice on how to handle it.