



Puppy Growth and Development

Program Puppies will go through many growth and developmental milestones throughout their time in the puppy raiser home. It is essential to understand each stage so that the puppy raiser may help the program puppies be as successful as possible.

8-12 Weeks of Age: Socialization Period

This is their sponge period, meaning that the program puppy is learning and soaking in how to interact with others. They accomplish this by closely observing how both humans and dogs interact with other humans, animals, objects, and other stimuli within their immediate environment. Program puppies are also learning through play during this time.

Program puppies are typically placed with their raisers at this stage. They then spend the first week bonding with the people and other animals in their new raiser home as well as start to adjust to their new routine. Through this, the program puppy will start to develop relationships with those in their immediate environment.

During this period, it is prime time to start implementing good manners and teaching appropriate behaviors both within the home and while out in public. Program puppies will be eager to both learn from and please their raisers. At 9 and 10 weeks it is ideal to start puppy classes to begin building their foundation.

Program puppies may also experience what is called a fear period between 9-10 weeks old. Raisers may notice the program puppy startle at random noises or seeing objects. For more information on fear periods, please see the section for fear periods below.

Training focus at this time should be about introducing potty training, crate training, name recognition, marker words ("Yes!" and "Free!"), walking nicely on leash, handling, new cues, new objects/stimuli, and environments. Training sessions should be about 10-15 minutes long and there should be around 3 practice sessions throughout the day. Public outings should take place 2-3 times a week, last for about 15-20 minutes, and consist of places with controlled environments with low human and dog foot traffic. Please see our curriculum in the training portion of the Puppy Portal for more training and public outing information.

Health focus during this time should include both the Bordetella and Da2pp vaccines done at 8 weeks of age. Then another Da2pp with Lepto, and Influenza vaccines at 12 weeks of age.

12-24 Weeks of Age: Pre-Adolescence

Pre-adolescence is a fun stage for program puppies! Puppies at this age are starting to become more independent and taking a more playful and curious approach to their environment. With their newfound independence and confidence, their personality traits really start to shine. This is also the period where their permanent adult teeth are coming through, which means the teething phase where every item in the household becomes a toy. Offering the program puppy frozen Kongs filled with kibble and low sodium chicken broth, or ice cubes with kibble and low sodium chicken broth can often help ease inflamed gums. Also freezing a few teething Nylabones can help assuage the gums as well.

At four months of age all program puppies will go down to two feedings per day, as well as be able to ride freely in the backseat of the car or on the back floorboards rather than in their crates.

Training focus during this time should be continued focus of exposure to novel stimuli, handling, good manners and building duration of previously learned cues. Program puppies will need to be introduced to the cues "Place" and "Under". Training sessions can now be bumped up to last 20-30 minutes, but still should be around 3 practice sessions a day. Practice sessions should also take place in different environments, and not solely within the home. Program puppies

will now be able to go on public outings that consist of medium human/dog foot traffic once they have had their Rabies vaccine.

Health focus during this time will consist of both the last Da2pp with Lepto booster, Influenza and the 1-year Rabies vaccines at 16 weeks of age.

6-12 Months of Age: Adolescence

The adolescence stage is most affectionately referred to as the teenager phase! Program puppy's hormones take center stage at this time and often program puppies will start to become more distracted, stubborn, sensitive, or forgetful. They will also start to test boundaries to see what they can and cannot get away with. Puppies at this age will also have a ton of energy to burn and can easily become bored. If program puppies are not receiving both mental and physical stimulation, they will often resort to unwanted and destructive behaviors for an outlet. Balance and consistency are absolutely essential during this age.

Training focus at this age should be about proofing all skills, cues, manners, continued exposure to novel stimuli, and handling. This means increasing what we call the "Three D's", duration, distance, distraction. For more information on the "Three D's" please refer to the curriculum in the Puppy Portal under the Training section. Training sessions should happen about 3-4 times a day, the time will entirely depend on the program puppy's attention span, but ideally would be around 30 minutes. If the program puppy is struggling or isn't focusing, you can reduce the amount of time as needed. Regardless of time, the practice sessions always need to end as successfully as possible. Puppies at this age can also handle public outings with heavier human and dog foot traffic.

Health focus at this age primarily revolves around the puppy's hormones as program puppies start to reach sexual maturity. During this time, you may notice some physical and behavioral changes due to hormonal surges. Although sexual maturity symptoms vary between male and female puppies, there are some similarities. These similarities include mood changes, shortened attention span, more interest in the opposite sex, and the urge to roam. However, there are also distinct differences depending on the sex of the puppy.

Males: Did you know that male puppies are capable of siring a litter of puppies as young as 5 months old? It has also been found that males can pick up the scent of a female in heat from over 5 miles away!

- **Hormones-** Males are typically most fertile between the ages of 12-15 months of age. During this time, you may notice other males becoming more aggressive towards the puppy.
- **Marking-** The urge to mark (lifting the leg to urinate on objects) may increase. If you notice the puppy has started marking, be sure to toilet them in areas where there are no standing objects like large rocks, poles, fences, trees etc. Instead, try to find a nice open flat open space like a grass field.
- **Mounting-** You may notice the puppy have the urge to start mounting and humping objects like blankets, toys, bedding, and sometimes even people. Try to discourage this as much as possible, if there is a certain item then remove it. If the behavior continues, contact your Dogs for Better Lives' representative.
- **Energy Levels-** The puppy may become more restless, easily distracted, or even hyper-active. It is very important to remember to exercise the puppy both physically and mentally during this time to prevent the puppy from becoming destructive. Play and training sessions are key.

Females: Female puppies typically go into heat anywhere from 6-15 months of age. Their heat cycle can last between 2-4 weeks. After their first heat, it is common that the female will have 1-2 heat cycles a year, usually every 6 months. Weight and activity levels can have an effect on heat cycles in puppies. Once a puppy goes into their heat cycle it is important to keep them at home during this time to prevent an unwanted pregnancy. Never leave them in the yard unattended, and no public outings or walks while they are in their heat cycle.

- **Hormones**- There may be noticeable behavioral changes and females may become more aggressive towards other females.
- **Urination**- You may notice a female puppy start to urinate more frequently in various amounts during a heat cycle. The urine will contain pheromones and hormones signaling the stage of her heat cycle and attract other dogs, especially males.
- **Bleeding**- Depending on the stage of the heat cycle (see phases of heat cycles below) will determine how much bleeding you may notice. Some females may keep themselves cleaner during their cycles and some may be less tidy. If you are raising a puppy who is going through a heat cycle, you may choose to purchase dog diapers to help keep the female from bleeding everywhere. Only use diapers when you can supervise the puppy, so they don't ingest or destroy the diaper. You may also choose to section off parts of the home that contain carpet or roll up rugs/other items that may not be easy to keep clean.
- **Phases of the Heat Cycle:**
 - **Proestrus**- 7-12 days before female is ready to be bred but has already started to bleed (spotting) and spread pheromones. During this time eggs start to mature, the vulva becomes enlarged and you will start to notice discharge as well as the female licking her vulva often. Females will not accept males at this time and you may start to see behavioral changes like lifting lips/snarling, growling, tucking their tail, or immediately sitting when another dog approaches to sniff the female.
 - **Estrus**- also known as a standing heat, happens 7-10 days after bleeding, lasts 9 days and is when the female is ready to be bred. Eggs are released from ovaries. Female may become restless and will now accept males by flagging (moving tale to the side).
 - **Metestrus**- happens only if she becomes pregnant. This stage involves fertilization, pregnancy, and milk production
 - **Anestrus**- last phase, begins with birth and ends with beginning a new heat cycle. This is the break in between cycles.
- **Irregular Heat Cycles:** Reasons for abnormal or irregular heat cycles can vary. However, if you suspect the puppy you are raising is experiencing any of these, please contact your Dogs for Better Lives Representatives.
 - **Absent Heat**- where a puppy misses a heat cycle. Most common in younger females.
 - **Split Heat**- where puppies start their heat cycle then stop before the second stage of the heat. The heat cycle resumes around 3-4 weeks after. Most common in younger females, usually their first heat and then can resolve on its own. However, some females can have continuous split heats.
 - **Silent Heat**- Where the female is in heat but shows no signs such as swollen vulva, discharge, or interest in males. Males can still detect a female in a silent heat and she is still able to become pregnant. If you suspect a silent heat, notify your Dogs for Better Lives representative.
 - **False Pregnancy**- Hormone surges can cause a false pregnancy where the mammary glands produce milk

Spaying & Neutering

- Unless a puppy is being considered for our breeding program, we will typically have the puppy spayed or neutered at around a year of age.
- When a puppy is altered before reaching full maturity, you can run the risk of potential orthopedic problems. Hormones instruct the growth of the plates when to close and altering before puberty causes the growth plates, which are still open, to remain open longer. This can cause the puppy to become orthopedically out of balance.
- Early alterations can also impact the incident of different types of cancer, hip dysplasia and development of canine cruciate ligament ruptures.

Things to remember:

- When puppies are going through hormonal changes it may seem like they have forgotten all of their training that you have taught them up to this point and can become more easily distracted. Remember to breathe, keep calm, and continue to be consistent with their training.

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12-16 Months of Age: Adulthood

Congratulations, you have made it through to adulthood and the program puppy is now a program dog! Depending on both the needs of the program dog and Dogs for Better Lives, program dogs can graduate and turn in for formal training anywhere from 14-16 months of age.

Training will remain consistent as far as proofing manners and behaviors while continuing to increase the “Three D’s”, expose them to novel stimuli, and continue handling. Training sessions should still happen throughout the day and last about 30-45 minutes. Public outings should still be happening about 2-3 times a week with a variety of human/dog foot traffic.

As far as health goes, dogs at this age have reached full maturity. Program dogs have all their permanent adult teeth, their growth plates are closed, and will be spayed/neutered unless they are being assessed for our breeding program. Their focus will slowly recover and return from their hormonal phase; however their energy levels and their now full adult strength may remain the same.

Fear Periods

All program puppies will go through at least two fear periods during their development stages; it is during this time that they learn about their environment and what should be identified as harmless or hazardous. During these periods, program puppies may show fear or avoidance of items, situations, or people with which they formerly felt safe. They may start barking at people entering a house or startle at common items like trash cans, signs or even flags.

The first fear period occurs predictably at around 8-11 weeks of age. The program puppy is very young at this point and raisers should be managing the environment carefully and maintaining controlled and pleasant exposure to novel stimuli. Often this first fear period passes without any obvious signs or behavior changes. Raisers may not even notice that it has taken place.

The second fear period is less predictable, but for most dogs it occurs as a 2–3-week period in late adolescence, somewhere between 6 and 14 months of age. This one is much more variable and can at times seem extreme. It is recommended to keep exposures to a minimum during this period. Outings should be calm with low distractions. One bad experience as a puppy can turn into a reoccurring fear later once the puppy matures. If at any time during a public outing, if the program puppy appears frightened follow these guidelines:

- Relax your body and act as if the object is no big deal. Reward for any eye contact you receive. If the program puppy sees that it isn’t a big deal to you, they will realize that they have nothing to fear.
- If a situation is too overwhelming to the program puppy, back away until the program puppy is relaxed again.
- Start from this point to build up the program puppy’s confidence. Give treats and praise the program puppy while it is relaxed and looking at the object.
- Gradually get closer to the site or item, but only as close as the program puppy can while remaining calm. Don’t force interactions and allow them to investigate on their own terms. Reward for any steps or eye contact made towards the site or item.
- ALWAYS end each exposure on a positive note, even if that means ending the trip early.