The 7 Stages of Puppy Development

Did you know that a basic understanding of puppy development can help you take a better care of your new puppy?

Puppies are pretty much like children, and there are stages, phases and milestones to celebrate with you fur baby too.

Puppy development can be divided fairly easily into 7 ‘Puppy Stages’, starting at birth and ending at maturity or adulthood.

Although puppies grow and mature very quickly when compared to humans, it’s also important to know that not all sizes and breeds develop at the same rate.

The smaller the breed, the quicker he/she will mature.

Smaller breeds generally reach maturity somewhere around 12 months of age, whereas large and giant breed puppies may be anywhere between 18 and 24 months old before they can be considered ‘adult’.

Puppy Growth Stages

STAGE 1: Birth – 3 Weeks

The first stage in puppy development covers the first 3 weeks of your puppy’s life.

Your pup is born blind, deaf and without teeth and these first weeks are very important time in their development. For most of the 2-3 weeks, puppies needs are simple – food and sleep. The majority of their growth takes place while they sleep, so this is a critical period.

At about 2 weeks old, your puppy will begin to open his eyes, and by 3 weeks their ears should also be open their tiny teeth will begin pushing through the gums. By the end of this first puppy stage, they are aware of the world around them and are trying to crawl, bark and interact with their littermates.

STAGE 2: 3 – 7 Weeks

This puppy stage is vital to your puppy’s social development as well as his physical development.

They will continue to grow rapidly in size, but more importantly, they start to get much more involved in social interaction with their mom, littermates and (very importantly) the humans in their life.

All kinds of things are learned during this stage of puppy development. Your puppy’s mom will teach them basic manners and begin to wean them. They’ll learn what kind of play is tolerated by their brothers and sisters. This is when ‘bit inhibition’ is practiced (learning to control how hard he can bite), and the ‘peckin order’ (order of dominance) within the litter is established. These are two of the reasons that’s it’s recommended that you don’t take a puppy from its mom and siblings earlier than 7-8 weeks.

By the end of this stage of puppy development, your little one is able to be left by their mom for short periods of time, eat puppy food, walk, run, bark, wag his tail and generally behave like a ‘puppy’.
At around 6 – 7 weeks old, your puppy should have his first set of puppy vaccinations and be wormed.

**Stage 3: 7 – 12 Weeks**

Between weeks 7 and 9, a puppy is mature enough to leave their mom and littermates, and join his new human family.

At this stage of puppy development, your puppy’s brain is ready to start soaking up all the lessons and experiences you can give them. They’ll learn fast, so it’s important to make sure you’re teaching them the right things.

Learning basic manners and commands, going to puppy classes, and having lots of positive socialization experiences are very important during this puppy stage.

But it’s also important to know that a puppy experiences it’s first ‘fear period’ somewhere between 8 and 12 weeks of age. Your pup may show fear or apprehension about people, places, or things that they were previously unafraid of. It’s important to continue with socialization in a positive, upbeat way and not to ‘coddle’ or spoil your puppy during this period. But, also be careful not to expose them to situations or experiences that are unduly nerve-wracking for them.

**Stage 4: 12 – 16 Weeks**

During this stage of puppy development, your puppy will show increasing independence and may even occasionally ignore/challenge you. It’s kind of like the ‘terrible twos’ in humans, this is just the canine equivalent!

They’ll also be teething at this time, and their sore gums will lead them to bite and chew on anything and everything.

This is one of the puppy stages where you’ll probably find yourself saying “no” an awful lot. But, remember never to use a harsh voice or physical punishments. Your puppy is just a baby and want to please you; it’s up to you to show them, with love and patience, what is expected of them.

Start basic obedience classes during this period to prepare your puppy to become a friendly, well behaved adult.

**Stage 5: 17 – 40 Weeks**

Your puppy will continue to grow and develop at an amazing rate during this period. It’s critically important to continue their training and socialization experiences, as they’ll be making assumptions and decisions about the world, and their place in it, during this stage of puppy development. They’ll continue to challenge you and test the limits too, so be prepared.

They may tend to act a little bratty at this age, continue to stick to your guns with the rules and behavior you expect. Don’t’ play games such as wrestling or tog of war (especially with large/guardian breeds), as it can encourage dominant behavior in some puppies.

Get your puppy spayed or neutered during this period. These procedures have a positive impact on your puppy’s future health and help to reduce the huge number of unwanted puppies born every year.
**Stage 6: 40 – 1 Year**

Depending on the size and breed of your puppy, they may become a mature adult during this stage of puppy development. Small and miniature breeds can reach maturity between 8 and 12 months of age, but large or giant breeds may not be considered adult until 18 months or more.

Although your pup may look like an adult dog by now, they may become a mature adult during this stage of puppy development. They’ll also have tons of energy, but not necessarily a lot of common sense – think teenager.

Pups of some breeds may become quite challenging at this point, and may make subtle (or even quite ‘in your face’) attempts at dominance. It’s important to continue obedience classes and socialization and to insist on good behavior and compliance with your rules. Always use a firm voice and positive reinforcement when training and correcting behavior, as shouting and harsh /physical punishment may cause a combative/aggressive response from your adolescent pup. A loving firm and patient hand is always best.

**Stage 7: 1 year +**

Somewhere between 1 and 2 years of age, most dogs reach full sexual and developmental maturity. You puppy’s growth will now taper off, although they will probably continue to fill out over the next few months.

At this point you can start your pup on more vigorous exercise, such as jogging, agility etc. because their bones and joints are fully developed and less prone to stress injuries.

You can now switch your pup over from his puppy food to a premium dog food, as his nutritional needs are changing.