



# ADOLESCENT DOGS: 6 FACTS TO KNOW

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By Nancy Tucker, CPDT-KA published in the Whole Dog Journal

## **What to expect during your dog's adolescence - that time after puppyhood otherwise known as the teenage years!**

Just about everyone knows to be prepared to deal with crazy/relentless puppy behavior, but way fewer dog owners, it seems, have been warned about the other challenging period in a dog's life: adolescence! A quick Google search on the topic produces results peppered with words like "surviving," "dealing with," and "misbehavior." These pages offer up a long list of things that can go wrong when dealing with teenage dogs, and suggest it will be more than difficult to get through. Goodness, it sounds horrible!

It's true that this period involves a ton of changes to your dog's biological, physical, and psychological makeup. By extension, his behavior is affected. It's also true that there are times when this transformation is accompanied by some challenging moments. But rest assured it's not all doom and gloom! For every challenging feature of canine adolescence, there is an equally awesome element that makes this a very special time.

The adolescent period typically begins around six months of age, and will be over when a dog reaches physical maturity around two to three years old. The most pronounced behavioral issues will be noticed between six to 12 months old. Keep in mind that although hormones have a lot to do with adolescent changes, they're not the only thing responsible for some of the behaviors you may see (even neutered dogs will exhibit these behaviors). Your dog's brain is growing and developing, and the apparent quirkiness of the process is all perfectly natural.

As a trainer and a person who is currently in the adolescent trenches with my Border Terrier, Bennigan, I can testify that it's not all bad. Here are some facts about canine adolescence that you may not be aware of, and some tips that, I hope, will help guide you through this challenging time with your "teenaged" dog.



## **1. Bonding with your teenage dog is important.**

The foundation of your relationship with your dog is taking shape and getting stronger. If you've had your adolescent dog since puppyhood, time has been on your side. You've had several months to get to know each other and to build a bond. That's a very good thing. It's always much easier to forgive and to exercise patience with someone (or a dog) we care deeply about. So while puppyhood antics may have pushed your buttons and left you scrambling for a moment's peace for several weeks in a row, adolescent shenanigans can be surprisingly easier to tolerate, thanks to that bond.

You'll still need to draw deeply from the patience pool during this time, but by now your dog will have improved in other departments: He'll know some basic cues thanks to your training; he'll be housetrained; and his needs won't always require an immediate response on your part, like when he was a young pup.

## **2. Teething is almost done!**

Most of the really difficult teething phase occurs before adolescence, and while it doesn't really wrap up until about seven to nine months old (on average), it's not nearly as dramatic as the earlier stages. Some dogs remain power chewers throughout their adult life, however, and it's important to evaluate and adjust the types of chew toys you're giving your adolescent dog.

What was suitable for a five-month-old puppy might no longer represent a safe option for your dog's newer and more powerful jaw. For example, if it used to take him an hour to work his way through a bully stick several weeks ago, it might now only last him 10 minutes and he should be watched closely. Or he may now be able to chew off chunks of a chew stick that previously he could barely dent.

## **3. Adolescent dogs have different sleeping schedules.**

Remember when your puppy used to spend more time asleep than awake? Yes, well. Those days are gone. Your teenage dog now seems to have access to an endless supply of energy! If you arm yourself



with lots of short, fun training sessions and brain games, you'll fare much better than if you rely solely on physical exercise to tire out your young dog. Besides, you'll want to avoid any serious physical activity that involves sudden stops and turns, or jumps and bounces. Your dog's skeletal structure isn't quite done taking shape yet, and you'll want to protect his joints until at least 12-18 months of age, depending on his size. (Speak to your vet for advice about this.)

Back to sleeping: Your teen dog will very likely experience some disruptions in his nighttime sleeping pattern, which means you'll also experience a few sleepless nights. He might snooze the entire evening away, and just when you're ready to call it a night at 11 pm, he's suddenly wide awake and ready to party! There's little you can do to convince him to settle down. Don't worry. These episodes will come and go, and all that's needed is a little bit (okay, a lot) of patience and time.

#### **4. Socializing your teenage dog is important!**

Socialization needs to continue. You've done a wonderful job socializing your pup during the sensitive socialization period (before 12-16 weeks of age), but it shouldn't stop now that your dog is a teenager. Even if you've just adopted an adolescent dog and his socialization history is unknown, it's important to continue to carefully expose your dog to different places, people, other dogs, and different situations (like riding in the car) while associating these events with something positive.

You might notice that your dog may quite suddenly appear wary or even fearful of things or situations that he previously had no issue with. This is normal. These moments will come and go several times during adolescence and may last anywhere from a couple of days to a few weeks. He may give a scary fire hydrant a very wide berth during your walk, or he might decide that new people or dogs (or trees, or shadows) should be barked at. Don't worry. Handle these moments with calm and patience, and understand that your dog isn't always able to control his emotions during these phases. Don't push or force him to "confront his fear," and don't scold him for what may look like rude behavior. Give him time to process whatever spooked him. If he wants to turn away and avoid the scary thing, that's fine. If he barks at it, that's fine, too. Often, just crouching next to him and talking with a gentle voice is



enough to calm the barking. Some people “lay low” when they notice their dog is experiencing a fearful phase, opting to avoid situations that cause their dog stress, like busy streets or large crowds (such as a fair or a dog sporting event). When their dog shows signs he’s feeling more confident, activities resume as normal.

#### 5. Teenage dogs become more interested in going for walks.

Many young puppies balk at wandering too far away from the safety of home. They’ll take a few steps on-leash and then will suddenly slam on the brakes and stand still like a statue. Nature designs them this way, for good reason. Adolescence serves to create just the opposite: A biological urge to wander further from the nest and to explore new places. You’ll notice your adolescent dog also has more stamina to keep up with you during daily walks, and that he enjoys investigating the various scents.

Adventures with your dog now become a lot more fun. Resist the urge to let him off-leash, unless you’re in a safely fenced area. Remember that he’s genetically predisposed to explore! His recall isn’t nearly as reliable as it was when he was a puppy (very normal), so don’t count on how good he was just a few weeks ago. Use a long leash if you want to give him more freedom. Keep practicing calling him back to you and reward him with a very yummy treat every time he comes. You’ll want to maintain this high rate of reinforcement until he’s an adult. Speaking of unreliable cues...

#### 6. Your dog’s training might seem to come and go.

Remember how proud you were of your puppy’s training results? How quickly he learned to sit, to lie down, to come, to leave it, to drop it, etc.? Where did all of those skills go? If it seems as though your dog has forgotten all of his training, don’t worry – he hasn’t. The information is still there, floating around in that rapidly developing brain of his. He’s just having a bit of trouble accessing all that knowledge right now. This too will return to normal when he’s done with the teenage phase. Keep teaching, keep rewarding, and keep breathing. All of your efforts will pay off later.