



Adolescent Dogs

A dog leaves puppyhood and enters adolescence at about the age of 6 months. The dog stays an adolescent until age 2.5 or 3 years. The most challenging age is usually between 9 to 18 months (which is when most dogs are surrendered to shelters). Some dogs pass through the phase with little trouble, but most drive their guardians crazy! During this phase it can be hard to see the light at the end of the tunnel.

Adolescent dogs have an insatiable curiosity about the world, which they explore through all their senses, including taste. They have no idea what things are supposed to look like or how much they cost. They don't know what cars can do to them or that people on bicycles are really people - to the dog they can be moving objects to be chased and nipped. Other bad behaviors can include:

- Digging - this is when they're on their way to China by way of your lawn.
- Chewing - a brand new set of molars needs exercise, and furniture seems like a good place to start.
- Jumping up - many adolescents are extremely rough - they greet and play with you and each other as though both of you are made of steel.
- Running away - remember when your three month old puppy stuck to you like glue? Well, no more - this dog has places to go and people to jump on.
- Growling or snarling - some dogs figure this is as good a time as any to challenge authority - you.
- Obedience. Obedience? They've never heard of the word and don't understand the concept.
- Not doing homework, taking your car, dying their hair - oops, that's teenage people! However, dogs go through the same thing in their own way.

So...what do you do about it? Wring your hands, clean up the mess...and **MANAGE YOUR DOG.**

- Start by thinking of your dog as a phenomenally active two year old child. Parents expect to have to child-proof their home against the damage that little one can do; multiply by ten and you have some of the damage that can be inflicted by your dog.

Here are some rules you might want to set to help keep your house (and sanity) intact.

- **Earn the right to roam.** Many people crate train their puppies to help housetrain them. Continue to use your crate for sleeping purposes, and to put your dog in when you need some time to yourself. But don't stop there. Limit your dog's space in the house to a manageable size until you are pretty sure he's trustworthy - a kitchen or family room blocked by baby gates is one alternative. Then you can CATCH him as he begins to chew on that table leg. And you can take ALL potentially attractive items off low tables - or even high ones if he's a big dog!

Though many people use a doggie door, it's usually not a good idea to let the dog have complete in and out privileges, certainly not at night. That gives him a very large space to protect and encourages such behaviors as barking and fence fighting. Instead, let him use his doggie door when you are home and confine him when you're gone. Give him more space as he proves himself worth it.

- **Learn to play politely.** If he has a habit of jumping on guests, even if he's just overly friendly, take away his greeting privileges. Many - if not most - people don't like to be greeted by paws on their chest. Set up a tie-down - a short leash attached to an immovable object - and when guests arrive ask them to wait a couple of minutes while you attach the dog to his tie-down. When he's quiet and they've settled in, you can let him off his tie-down (though you may wish to leave a leash on for control), and he can socialize. This is better than putting him outside, where he will feel ostracized and may whine and bark which you certainly can't control while you're entertaining your guests. If he whines or barks on the tie-down, say "quiet" and squirt water on him or use a can filled with pennies to intimidate him.

If he jumps on you try this method to discourage the behavior. REPLACE the behavior with a more acceptable one and only reinforce that. For instance, if you come home from work and he's jumping all over the place, stay calm and protect your body (!) Tell her to sit (once! it does no good at all to repeat the command to an excited dog) and when he backs off and sits, pet and praise him. Any of the other techniques we use teach the dog what NOT to do, not what TO do...and they need to learn what we want. To help you with that, ask him to sit before petting him ever...before throwing the ball...before giving food. It should be his way of saying "please."

- **Control that mouth.** If your dog chews on you, it's called "mouthing," and you should treat it as a serious problem. It's an instant signal that playtime is over. If a dog is under three months of age, you can squeal like another puppy and stop playing for a few seconds... but for any dogs over three months, make sure they know it's serious. Stop playing abruptly, freeze

and growl "NO" (one of the few times you should say that word, which loses its value the more it's over-used). When the dog backs off, smile and begin playing again. If the dog continues to mouth, go through the whole thing again, then walk away. Alternatively, freeze, place your hand around the dog's mouth, hold it gently and apply pressure downwards (this is not violent or hard - it's just a sign that you are displeased).

Your dog should learn that though he shouldn't play roughly with you, he can play roughly with OBJECTS. So the same time you teach him not to mess with your skin (or any other human's), teach him to play tug of war with a toy he likes. The tug part is easy (!) - teaching him to drop it can also be easy. You just have some treats handy, and while the dog is tugging, you say "drop it," and push a treat in the side of the dogs' mouth. As he tastes the food, he'll let the toy go. Praise him, and start the game over again. Within minutes, he'll be tugging and letting go at your command - after all, this is a win-win situation!

- **Sharing is good.** Ever try to take something from a toddler when they don't want you to? Expect a battle - it can be hard! Same with adolescent dogs. In the dog world, what's mine is MINE and they need to learn that food and objects are really yours - but you're very generous with them. With food, as your dog finishes eating, walk up to him, tell him to sit, and offer him better food. Put a bit in his mouth and a bit in his bowl. You don't need to take food away from him if you play this game a lot.

Exercise is essential. The only good adolescent is a tired adolescent. Dog parks if he plays politely, two long runs a day if he doesn't. Dogs were designed by nature to be active in the morning and evening hours, and we can help that by exercising them at that time and encouraging rest in between.

Learn to say please. Teach your dog to sit before he gets anything he wants - food, attention, petting, whatever. Better yet, take him to school, where he can learn how to behave in a civilized manner. Obedience classes often improve a rocky relationship and can be fun for both guardian and dog.

The best news is that things will get better with your management, time, and age, and by the time your dog is 3 or 4, you'll have the dog you always wanted.

The Marin Humane Society, Animal Behavior & Training, T. King