

## Critical Periods in a Puppies Development

"What the puppy learns now will shape it into the kind of dog it will be for evermore"

- **Zero to 21<sup>st</sup> Day**
- **21<sup>st</sup> to 28<sup>th</sup> Day**
- **5<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> Week**
- **8<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> Week**
- **13<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> Week**
- **Dog owners Responsibilities**

Acquiring a puppy at the right age and providing it with the proper atmosphere during the critical periods of its life (when character and personality are being formed) is the only absolute way that the man/dog relationship, character traits, and trainability can be pre-determined and pre-ordained.

Many people who acquire dogs at the age of six months, eight months, a year or even two years, are perplexed to find that their dogs just can't seem to demonstrate much of an emotional bond with their owner. Sometimes, they are shy which usually results in a characteristic known as fear biting, or perhaps the reverse is true; over-aggressiveness and bullish tendencies.

Scientific studies have shown that there are FIVE critical periods in a puppy's life. That is five phases of mental development during which adverse conditions could cripple a dog emotionally for life. Conversely, positive conditions during these five phases will produce dogs of the highest caliber mentally and socially. So important were these scientific findings that the Guide Dog Foundation instituted these "positive conditions" for puppies being raised to become Guide Dogs for the blind. These dogs received the most rigorous and exacting training of any dogs and therefore must be perfectly adjusted.

Dr J Paul Scott, Director of The Animal Behavior Laboratory directed a project to determine just when these critical periods are shown in one particular test - extreme though it may have been.

A puppy, twenty-one days old was removed from the litter and completely isolated. Although it was carefully fed and watered, its caretaker was careful not to play with or even speak to it. The only toys the experimental puppy had were a water bucket and food dish. By sixteen weeks of age the puppy had not had any contact with other dogs (except for the first 21 days of his life) and no human contact except for being fed and watered by a caretaker who barely acknowledged the pup's existence.

At four months of age, the experimental puppy was once again placed with its litter mates. It did not recognize them, either as litter mates or dogs. The puppy's isolation during the critical periods of its life, its complete removal from the companionship of other dogs and humans had developed as character to such an extent that it would never adjust to the society of either. The puppy had passed the age of being capable of adjusting socially.

**Zero to 21 days:** As a result of many years of scientific research it has been determined that the first critical period covers the entire first two weeks of the puppy's life. During this period the puppy's mental capacity is nearly zero, and the puppy reacts only to its needs of warmth, food, sleep and its mother.

Tests were conducted to determine whether a puppy was capable of learning anything at all during the first critical period, and it was determined that it was not. It was, however, determined that something nearly miraculous occurs on the 21st day, and that it occurs in all dogs, regardless of breed.

**21st Day:** On the 21st day. ALL of the puppy's senses begin to function. The senses were present in the puppy during the first critical period, but were dormant. The 21st day of the puppy's life is like an automatic switch that turns on. It also turns on the second and possibly the most important critical period in the puppy's life.

**21st to 28th Day:** During this period the puppy needs its mother more than any other time. The brain and nervous system begin to develop. Awareness begins to take place, and, in this mental stage, a new puppy finds the world that surrounds it rather frightening. Things that happen can be frightening experiences. A

puppy removed from its mother during this second critical period will never attain the mental and emotional growth that it COULD and WOULD have, if it had been left alone. The social stress of being alive - and the awareness of it - has its greatest impact during this second critical period in the new puppy's life; that is, between the 3rd and 4th weeks.

It may seem peculiar to some that no other times in a dog's life presents the same proneness to such emotional upsets and that such upsets could have such a traumatic and permanent effect on the puppy's social attitudes. It is during this second critical period in the new puppy's life that the characteristic of nervousness can generate shyness and other negative qualities in a puppy. Once adverse conditions have developed negative qualities in this second critical period, no amount of re-conditioning or training, later in life will alter or significantly modify the resultant negative characteristics.

**5th to 7th Weeks:** This must be considered as the third period in the puppy's life. The puppy will venture away from home, not very far, and do a little exploring. At the beginning of the 6th week, awareness of society will dawn. That is, the society of man and the society of the dog. The puppy's nervous system and trainability are developing and by the end of this critical period, will have developed to capacity.

During this third critical period, your puppy will learn to respond to voices and will begin to recognize people. It is during this period that a "social pecking order" will be established among the puppies in the litter. Some of the puppies will learn to fight for food, they will be the bullies. The litter mates that are cowed by the aggressive tendencies of the others will become shy.

The scientific tests at Hamilton station have shown that it is an advantage for a puppy to remain with the litter long enough to acquire a little competitive spirit but that too much is detrimental to the puppy's emotional growth. Puppies that remain with litter mates after the seventh week will develop bullish or cowed tendencies which will remain with them into adulthood.

The third critical period ends during the 7th week and the puppy is now considered emotionally developed and ready to learn. The training ability system within the dog is ripe and is operating to capacity. What it learns during the fourth critical period will be retained and become part of the personality and characteristic of the overall dog. If the puppy is left with the mother, its emotional development will be crippled. It will remain dependent upon her, but in her will find very little security since she will begin to totally ignore the pup.

If the puppy remains with the litter beyond this point, and without adequate human contact, its social adjustment will be learned from litter mates. The optimum time for taking a puppy into a new household is at the end of the seventh week and the beginning of the puppy's fourth critical period.

**8th to 12th Week:** This fourth critical period extends to the 12th week of the puppy's life. Since the puppy's trainability, or learning facilities, are operating at full capacity now, it is better that he do his learning from his new owner. And learn he will. This period marks a time when the puppy will learn at a fast and furious pace. Although the "come, sit, stay and no" commands are invaluable if taught during the fourth period, perhaps the most important single response during this period is learning to fetch. At first glance this may sound unnecessary and unimportant.

It should be pointed out however those puppies that cannot learn to fetch are dropped from the Guide Dogs Program. Moreover, adult dogs bring trained as Drug Detector Dogs and Bomb Detector Dogs must first learn to fetch. A dog that cannot learn to fetch or refuses to learn will not become a detector dog or guide dog. The significance of fetching cannot be over emphasized. How such a game expands a puppy's mind and what such willingness to fetch reveals about a puppy would require an article in itself. Learning to fetch in the 4th critical period can spell success or failure in your dog's desire and ability to work for you.

**13th to 16th Week:** The fifth and final critical period is from the 13th to 16th week of the puppy's life. A highly significant thing will happen during this period and the owner should be prepared for it and ready to handle it smoothly and with confidence. The puppy will make its first attempt to establish itself as the dominant being in the "pack" (family). It is now that the puppy will learn whether it can physically turn on its owner and get away with it.

It would be well to point out here that if the puppy is allowed to get away with it, the confidence and the respect of the owner that developed during the fourth critical period will be lost. The tolerance level towards the owner will narrow.

The puppy learns by rebelling that it can get things its own way. It is during this 5th critical period that absolute authority will be challenged. It is here that the challenge must be met, head on, by the dog's owner. Instructing people as to the best method of dealing with the problem is difficult because no two dogs are exactly alike. Disciplinary measures for one dog are not necessarily suitable for another.

In dog training schools the question is often asked: "What shall I do if my dog bites me?" The answer usually goes something like this: "What would you do if your child hit you?" Suffice to say that the new puppy will challenge your authority during the fifth critical period and try to establish itself as the dominant being. It should be shown swiftly and firmly that, although you love it implicitly, by all that's holy, YOU are the dominant being and there is only room at the top for one!

Formal obedience training should begin during this fifth critical period, if the full potential of the puppy's intelligence and companion ability is to be realized.

Being aware of the five critical periods and providing the correct environment during these periods, as well as instituting proper learning techniques, will allow a puppy to develop emotionally and socially to full potential. Each time you marvel at a guide dog leading its blind master through busy traffic, you can be assured that the five critical periods were the criterion for the successful performance of the dog.

When you bring your puppy home, the critical periods which will follow will be critical periods in your life as well. The way you handle those periods will determine what kind of dog you will have in the years to come. It may, however, determine what kind of dog someone else will have. If the puppy you acquired doesn't grow up to be what you wanted it to be, if it has strange quirks in its behavior which embarrass or distress you, the dog may end up being passed from home to home. Chances are, no one else will be satisfied with those quirks either.

Who can enjoy the dog that rolls over on his back and piddles at the approach of a stranger? Who can be satisfied with the dog who wants to bite anything that moves? And perhaps, most important of all, who can be satisfied with the dog that refuses to give of himself, his devotion and his loyalty and his love?

The puppy you acquire can grow up to be all the things you want and desire it to be, if you acknowledge and adhere to the critical periods in its life. These are the periods which shape and mould its character and personality. The puppy is in your hands. What it is to become, it will become during these critical periods.

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