

The Trials and Tribulations of Adolescence

As a canine behaviour consultant, I frequently encounter clients whose dogs are experiencing issues such as heightened arousal, difficulty paying attention, failure to follow previously mastered cues, and reactivity in dogs that were once friendly. Often, these dogs are between six months and two years old. While the specific diagnosis may vary, the underlying cause is often adolescence.

Adolescence in dogs is a transitional period between puppyhood and adulthood, characterized by significant physical, behavioural, and hormonal changes. This stage typically begins around six months of age and can last until the dog is approximately 18 months to two years old, or even longer, depending on the breed and individual dog. As Maggi Burt, of Tailspin Petworx, noted in her article published in the November 2023 SODR newsletter, during this developmental phase, dogs experience intense emotions with limited impulse control. She highlights that it is unsurprising that this age group constitutes the largest number of dogs surrendered to shelters and rescues.

During adolescence, dogs often exhibit increased independence, test boundaries, and may seem to forget previously learned behaviours. This phase is analogous to the teenage years in humans, where dogs undergo rapid growth and development. The physiological changes occurring in adolescent dogs are substantial. The prefrontal cortex, the brain region responsible for executive function, is still immature and developing. Meanwhile, the emotional center is fully developed, and hormonal changes further complicate the adolescent mind.

In her keynote address at the 2024 Association for Professional Dog Training (APDT) Conference, Dr. Kathy Murphy, DVM and Neuroscientist explained that adolescent dogs differ significantly from puppies and adults in that they:

- Have an increased sensitivity to emotional stimuli
- Exhibit heightened sensitivity to punishment
- Take twice as long to recover from stressors
- Show decreased interest in rewards
- Display unpredictable cognitive and emotional control
- Are more likely to move forward and less likely to retreat

Given these challenges, how can one manage an adolescent dog exhibiting frustrating behaviours and help them navigate this period to emerge as a well-balanced adult?

1. **Focus on enrichment and natural behaviours:** During adolescence, there will be days when your dog appears unresponsive and unable to focus, with once reliable cues seemingly ineffective. On such days, take a break from human-focused activities and, instead, take your dog on a walk in the woods or a field to explore the environment. Bring along a favorite toy or treats and look for opportunities to reinforce behaviours such as returning to you voluntarily or offering attention. Hide treats in your yard and engage in a "hunting" game with your dog. These activities can alleviate pressure and acknowledge that your dog's cognitive abilities may be temporarily hindered by ongoing biological changes.
2. **Introduce Pattern Games:** Dogs have a remarkable ability to recognize patterns. Introducing pattern games can equip them with skills to cope with their environment. Regular practice of these classically conditioned activities can provide both dogs and their owners with strategies for managing

overwhelming situations. Leslie McDevitt's books, "Control Unleashed", describes numerous pattern games that can help dogs navigate adolescence.

3. **Teach relaxation protocols and arousal regulation early:** When you get your puppy, teach them to relax on a mat, cot, or platform. Practice arousing your puppy and then calming them down on their designated spot. Engage them with a toy and then break off the game by scattering treats in the grass for them to forage and consume. Early practice of these activities increases the likelihood that these skills will be beneficial during adolescence.
4. **Be aware of your dog's reaction to environmental stimuli:** Adolescent dogs are highly sensitive to stimuli and punishment. Protect them when they are out in the world, watching for signs of stress or over-arousal. Provide calm guidance and security, managing their environment to minimize negative experiences that could have lasting effects on their psyche.
5. **Be mindful of bravado:** Adolescent dogs are more likely to charge forward when afraid rather than retreat. If your dog shows signs of fear towards another dog or person, it is your responsibility to protect them and those around them by removing them from the situation. Do not be misled by their forward motion if they exhibit signs of fear, such as pinned ears, raised hackles, lip licking, and dilated pupils. These signs indicate a negative reaction that could escalate to barking, growling, snarling, or even biting.
6. **Avoid punishment:** Due to their increased sensitivity to punishment, it is crucial to communicate expectations to adolescent dogs with care. Humane and kind training methods are always advocated, but they are especially important during adolescence. Remain calm and in control of your emotions when working with dogs of this age group. Their resilience to negative experiences is diminished, and the effects of punishment can have lasting and sometimes catastrophic consequences on their behaviour.

These are just a few examples of how we can support our dogs through this challenging developmental stage. While their brains have not lost the knowledge instilled in them as puppies, it is important to recognize that some days will be more challenging for them to focus and participate as desired. On such days, remember Dr. Kathy Murphy's mantra: **patience, not push**. What she is saying is, if you notice your dog is having a challenging day, be empathetic and patient and do not push your dog to comply or perform. Support and care for them. Have fun with them. Try the hard stuff again another day!



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