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Adolescent dogs, like human teens, need some guidance

Dr. Franklin Utchen

DR. UTCHEN: We adopted an 8-month old Labrador who is a wonderful family member. However, he is so hyper that he is wearing us out. How can we get him to calm down? Signed, "Dog Tired"

Dear D.T.,

You have adopted a teenager. The adolescent dog, like the adolescent human, has an immature brain in a body that's nearly the size of an adult.

The dog's maturing process resembles the human teenager in several ways, and your canine needs similar guidance during this difficult stage of life.

Dogs are highly instinctive animals who have difficulty understanding human priorities. Let's take a look at some of the things going on in the adolescent dog's body and mind.

- The permanent teeth are in or coming in, and the dog needs to chew. He or she does not make the same distinctions we do about the difference between a dog chew toy and your expensive shoes. Best advice: don't leave your stuff around for your dog to chew on, and provide plenty of chew toys.

-Rapid growth may have the dog in mild or even severe pain. Some conditions that occur during this period require medical treatment, while others may be self-limiting. We don't always know how much pain a particular dog may feel. Some dogs require medication and restricted activity for a time, and others may require surgery.

-The adolescent dog has to discover and come to terms with limits.

-The body of the intact adolescent male dog produces testosterone at a rate several times above the adult level.

As a result, some male-oriented behaviors can become extreme at this stage of life if the dog is not altered. These include urine-marking, roaming, and aggression toward other male dogs.

-The intact female dog's body prepares for and experiences the first heat cycle. Behaviors you may see around this time include flirty and playful activity toward male dogs, roaming, frequent urination, false pregnancy and aggression toward other female dogs.

-Defense drives begin to mature in adolescence, and fears the dog developed at a younger age are expressed in either shy or aggressive behaviors.

-Other dogs begin to hold the adolescent dog more accountable than they did the puppy, with fighting as a possible result. The adolescent dog is beginning to find a place in the pack, and this process doesn't always go smoothly.

A family is far from helpless in handling the adolescent dog, and it is a wonderful opportunity to establish a great, lifelong relationship with your canine family member. In some ways you just need to keep doing the same good job you've been doing to raise the younger pup.

Male and female dogs tend to mature at different rates. Among the large breeds, males may take a year longer to behave in a fairly mature, calm manner .

And of course, adolescence doesn't begin or end abruptly. It is an uneven process that can take quite some time, or a dog may go through most of it within several months.

If you got your dog as a puppy and provided good training, you have an advantage when adolescence arrives.

However, your work as a trainer of your own dog is never done.

The adolescent dog needs training experiences that the puppy was not ready for.

Best of all, the adolescent dog is ready to begin to bond with you in a whole new way. Younger puppies "love everybody."

Adolescent dogs are ready to make distinctions about the world and the people and other dogs in it.

You become an important person in this dog's life, a beloved partner, if you earn it.

This is the time that good leadership with your dog, including good management, handling and training, begin to really show results.

If possible, I recommend staying in training classes with your adolescent dog until at least one year of age.

Many dogs will benefit from even more training classes. Attend training class each week and practice the class homework every day. Apply the training in all possible situations so that it becomes integrated into your life with your dog, keeping communication clear between the two of you.

Working with a private trainer is a reasonable alternative to classes, provided you and your dog also work controlled situations around other dogs as you would in a class.

Be patient with your dog. Don't interpret your dog's error during a training session as deliberate defiance. The dog needs to ask questions, like: "Can I get away with this? No? Okay, then can I get away with this?" You will be wisest to answer those questions kindly as well as consistently. The dog won't be any better trained because you get mad in the process.

Training done in a playful tone is more effective than getting mad, because this is the most receptive state of mind for learning-and that goes for your brain as well as the dog's! Have fun when training, and make it fun for the dog, too. Hold the line on the limits of behavior because the dog needs this from you. But don't fault the dog for having questions. His or her job at this stage is to find the limits of acceptable behavior by pushing them. That's the nature of an adolescent.

Your job is to define those limits in a loving way.

Most people don't understand dog adolescence. Sadly, it is a prime time for people to give up on their dogs.

In reality, it is a chance to help mold your dog into a great lifelong companion, if you are able to

understand where your dog is coming from at this stage of development. Both of you can come out on the other side of adolescence with an incredible bond that will enrich the rest of your lives.

Dr. Franklin Utchen has been practicing veterinary medicine in San Ramon since 1989 and currently co-owns **Bishop Ranch Veterinary Center & Urgent Care**. E-mail bishopranchvets@yahoo.com.

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