

Enduring Your Dog's Adolescence

The cages at A.D.O.P.T. or your local animal shelter are occupied by all shapes and colors of dogs, male and female, purebred and mixed breed. If you investigate a little closer, you'll probably see that these orphans have one thing in common: most are adolescents. For dogs, that can be anywhere from age five months to two or three years.

The reason the shelter contains few puppies is obvious: Most puppies are adorable. They not only look and act cute but typical puppies follow their owners everywhere, as well. They team quickly and respond to praise. They hardly bark at all.

Then, like a lightning bolt, puberty strikes. The pup starts to feel independent. He begins noticing things in life that might be more interesting than pleasing Mom and Dad. He ignores orders, unless they're accompanied by threats – "It's as if he's gone deaf overnight" frustrated owners complain. He'll bark, not only at strangers, but even at friends whom you've welcomed into your home. Couches, wallpaper and drapes may fall to his teeth and paws – and now he's big enough and strong enough to do far more damage than he could as a puppy. Most embarrassing of all, he (or she) may even begin to mount family members.

In short, your sweet fluff ball has turned into a teenage werewolf. No wonder so many adolescent dogs end up at shelters. In your family, though, you can follow these steps to ensure the easiest possible "teens":

1. Neuter your pet.

At puberty, puppies are bombarded with a series of sex hormones that dramatically affect behavior. Testosterone makes males territorial and makes them want to mark their special places in their surroundings, which may include landmarks in your home, like the couch.

Males become sexually active. Because people, rather than dogs, make up their pack, they naturally try to breed with people. Male dogs also start to jump fences in search of new females and territory to conquer. Instead of playing with other dogs, they may now try to dominate them.

For females, there is also behavior problems linked to the estrogen surge at puberty. It brings on estrus, or heat, the only time a female will accept a male to breed. To advertise availability, females urinate more frequently, often in the home. Some become nervous or irritable, whine or even mount other dogs or their owners. After estrus, if a female dog is not pregnant, she may go into a false pregnancy, when she aggressively guards objects as if they were puppies. You can minimize these behaviors by neutering your dog before puberty. Since the exact age of puberty's onset depends on size (later for bigger breeds), check with your veterinarian about the best time to neuter. There are no medical benefits to waiting to spay a female until after her first heat.

Neutering prior to puberty may make the transition into adolescence less severe. But even without the hormones, behavior changes occur.

2. Don't expect a 'free lunch'.

Right from the beginning, it's important to structure your dog's life so that you gain his respect. Before you do anything for your dog, ask him to do something for you. Ask him to sit or lie down before you greet him, pet him, feed him, open a door for him, put his leash on or play. In this way, he'll learn that you are his leader.

3. Maximize praise.

Physical punishment is not necessary and often backfires. It often makes dogs aggressive or fearful. Deal with misbehavior with a firm 'no'; then show the correct way and offer praise when it's done right. If you don't want Brandy on the furniture, praise her for sitting on the floor. If she attempts to climb up, say "no" and remove her. Then place her on the floor and praise her.

4. Take him to school.

Ideally, obedience training should begin in puppy hood, but it's never too late. Obedience classes can't cure your dog immediately, but they can provide the tools you need to take control. Look for a class that emphasizes praise and reward rather than punishment.

5. Offer chew toys.

Chewing is the way dogs explore things: First they sniff something, then they hold it in their mouth, then they eat it or shred it. This play and investigatory behavior can worsen after puberty. If your dog starts directing it toward the furnishings, keep him away from problem areas until he learns to control himself – for example, confine him to the kitchen when you're not in the house. Spraying the object of his desires with a bitter-flavored spray, available in pet stores, can be effective.

But it's also important to provide your dog with chewy alternates. Good chew toys include rawhide strips or pressed rawhide, Nylabones, rope toys, fleece toys, and dried hooves and ears. Every time your dog chews on her toy, praise her. If she begins to chew on something that's not hers, replace it with her toy, and praise her again for chewing the toy.

6. Don't reward aggression.

Sometime after puberty, the puppy who once loved everyone may now become suspicious, even of your friends. Territorial aggression is natural for dogs and doesn't seem to be influenced by hormones; both males and females are territorial. Owners usually like the fact that their dogs bark when they see a stranger at the door. But it's a mistake to praise aggression. He'll bark whether you praise him or not. When it gets out of hand, let him know that he's gone too far by saying "that's enough" and calling him away. Put him in a sit-and-stay position and praise him. By the way, yelling at your dog while he's barking at the door often makes it worse because he thinks you are joining in with him.

7. Play, play, play.

A mentally and physically tired adolescent is a nappy adolescent. Remember, dogs were bred to work alongside humans. They crave stimulation and exercise. Out-of-control behavior can be the result of living a dull life. So play interesting games with your dog, games such as hide-and-peek, fetch, and Frisbee. If there's an agility course nearby (a dog obstacle course), bring Fido to try it (Your local dog-training club can refer you to one.). Try to walk in the woods or open fields every so often, so your dog can run, play and sniff as she pleases.

And, if possible, arrange for your dog to play with other dogs; it's the best exercise for an adolescent. If you bring your dog to a playground or park at prime dog-walking hours (early morning and after work), you'll make friends with other dog owners, too.

Above all, remember what your parents went through when you were a teenager. Be patient and kind. Adult dogs do slow down and mellow out. Until then, try to admire your teen for his energy and exuberance. The best is yet to come.