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Adolescent Dogs

Between the ages of 5-18 months is a challenging but temporary stage in raising a young dog. These dogs may look grown, but aren’t fully mature, so they require a little more time and attention than adult dogs. Here’s what to expect and ways to manage these behaviors.

Destructive Chewing

At around 5 months, your puppy’s adult teeth have emerged, bringing about a second teething phase that will last until they are around 2 years old. At this stage, your dog doesn’t just like to chew, they NEED to chew! They still have teething pain, so provide them with plenty of appropriate things to chew.

* Rope toys
* Bully sticks
* Benebones™
* Frozen whole carrots

The chewing during this phase can be much more destructive, so keep shoes and valuable items out of reach and use baby gates or pens to keep them out of tempting areas.

Play Biting

Young dogs are extra “bitey.” This is how they played with their littermates and how they try to play with you. Play biting isn’t something you can stop right away, but you can follow these steps so you don’t accidentally make it last longer than it has to!

* Watch the clock for problem times. Play biting is the most intense in the morning and evening, around dawn/dusk or mealtimes.
* Be proactive. Plan walks and other activities about 15 minutes before the problem times:
* Exercise their mind. Feed all meals from puzzle toys or in training sessions. Even learning a silly new trick burns energy!
* Put their nose to work. Hiding or scattering treats in the house or yard is a great self-guided activity for busy dogs.
* Remove your attention. If biting starts, stop the interaction for 2-3 seconds; freeze, turn your body, or walk into another room. The dog is likely to pause in their biting. Be ready to immediately reward with attention or play, then give them something better to do.
* Avoid scolding. Your dog wants your attention. Looking, touching, or talking to your dog rewards the behavior! Punishment can also increase frustration or cause fear, which can lead to bigger problems, including aggression.
* You get what you reward. Advice that encourages “redirecting” the biting to a toy is misguided, as the dog gets exactly what they wanted…play! Save the toy as a reward for appropriate behavior.

This behavior will only improve if you are consistent and provide plenty of good outlets for play and burning energy.

Anxiety & Reactivity

Young dogs at this stage may start to act fearful or reactive (barking/growling) between 5-12 months. This can be triggered by things that didn’t bother them before, like garbage cans, strangers, or other dogs. These problems can become long-lasting if not addressed correctly. Follow these steps to help your dog:

* Respect their choice to avoid triggers. Don’t force them to “face their fears” or their behavior could get worse over time.
* Move. If they growl, bark, stop eating treats, or show other signs of high stress, move them away from the situation.
* Catch them doing something right. If they see a trigger, but haven’t reacted yet, reward them with treats (soft treats work best). This helps create positive associations.

Normal But Temporary

Adolescent dogs are impulsive, have an abundance of energy, and need your patience and gentle guidance. They need continued training until they are 2-3 years old - and they will always need reinforcement for doing things right.

The training you do now will lead to a well-behaved adult dog. Be generous with play and food rewards during this time. Praise is nice, but you’re competing with people, dogs, squirrels and more for your dog’s attention. You’ll be much happier with your training results!

Recommended Books

* Juvenile Delinquent Dogs, Sue Brown
* Chill Out Fido, Nan Arthur

Some of these behaviors may require the help of a behavior professional. Visit IAABC.org or CCPDT.org to find someone in your area.