

Critical Periods in a Puppy Life

(Taken in part from: Complete Dog training Manual by Bruce Sessions)

This chapter is an introductory course - in basic puppy development.

The five critical periods.

Scientific studies have shown that, there are five critical periods in a puppy's life that is to say five phases of mental development during which adverse conditions can cripple a dog emotionally without hope of recovery. Conversely, positive conditions during these five phases of emotional growth can produce dogs of the highest caliber - mentally and socially. So important are these findings, that guide dog foundations instituted these "positive conditions" for puppies being raised to become leaders of the blind. Dogs trained to lead the blind receive the most rigorous and exacting training of any dogs and therefore must be perfectly adjusted. Dr Paul J Scott, Director of Animal Behavior at Roscoe B Jackson Memorial Laboratory at Bar Harbor, Maine, directed a project to determine just when these critical periods took place. The consequences of a person's failure to acknowledge and respond to these critical periods were demonstrated in one particular test. A puppy 21 days old was removed from the litter and completely isolated. Although the puppy was fed and watered, the caretaker was careful not to play with or speak to it. The only toys the experimental puppy had were his water bucket and food dish. By 16 weeks of age, the puppy had no contact with other dogs (except during the first 21 days of its life) and no human contact except the caretaker. At four months of age, the experimental puppy was once again placed with his litter mates; he did not recognize them, either as litter mates or as dogs! His isolation during the critical periods of his life - his complete removal from the companionship of dogs and humans - had marked his character to the extent that he could not adjust to animal or human society.

First Critical Period: 0 - 20 days (0 to 3 weeks).

As a result of many years of scientific research, it has been determined that the first critical period covers the entire first three weeks of a puppy's life, 0 to 20 days. During this period, a 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 this first critical period; it was determined that it was not.

Second Critical Period: 21 - 28 days (3 to 4 weeks).

Scientists found, however, that something nearly miraculous happened on the 21st day, and it occurs in all dogs, regardless of breed. On the 21st day, all of a puppy's senses begin to function. The senses were present in the puppy during the first critical period but were dormant. The 21st day marks the beginning of the second critical period. During this period (21st to 28th day) the new puppy needs its mother more than at any other time. The brain and nervous system begin to develop. Awareness begins to take place, and in this mental state, a puppy's

experiences can be rather frightening. A puppy removed from its mother during this second critical period will never attain the mental and emotional growth that it could. During the second critical period, the social stress of being alive has its greatest impact on a puppy. No other time in a dog's life is so crucial to emotional growth. It is during the second critical period that the characteristic of nervousness can generate shyness and other negative qualities in a puppy. Once negative characteristics have been allowed to develop (during this critical period) no amount of reconditioning or training later in life alters the negative characteristics.

Third Critical Period: 29 - 49 days (4 to 7 weeks).

The third critical period is the fifth through the seventh week (29 to 49 days). At that age, puppies will venture away from the nest - although not very far - and do a little exploring. At the beginning of a puppy's sixth week, the awareness of society will dawn; that is, the society of man and the society of dog. A puppy's nervous system and his trainability are developing and, by the end of the third critical period, will have developed to capacity. Unfortunately some dog books say that a puppy has the brain of an adult at the conclusion of the third critical period. This is not true, and research proves it. At the conclusion of the third critical period (the seventh week of age), the puppy's nervous system and trainability have developed to capacity, so a more comprehensive look at what takes place during this third critical period is certainly in order. During this period a puppy will learn to respond to voices and will begin to recognize people. A social "pecking order" will be established among the puppies in the litter. Some of the puppies will learn to fight for their food and will learn to be bullies. Litter mates that are cowed by aggressive tendencies of the others will become shy. The scientific tests at Hamilton Station have shown that it is advantageous 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. The pups that remain in the litter after the seventh week will begin to develop bullish or cowed tendencies - which will remain with them into adulthood. The longer a puppy remains with the litter after completing the seventh week of its life, the more deteriorated the emotional growth of that puppy will be. At the end of the third critical period, the puppy is considered emotionally developed and ready to learn. But the puppy does not possess an adult brain at that age.

Fourth Critical Period: 50 - 84 days (7 to 12 weeks).

The trainability of a puppy is ripe and operating to capacity as the puppy enters its eighth week of life. Thus, the puppy enters the fourth critical period of emotion; growth (50 to 84 days). What the puppy learns during the fourth period will be retained and become part of the dog's personality. If a puppy is left with its mother during the fourth critical period, its emotional development will be crippled. The puppy will remain dependent upon her, but in her will find very little - if any - security. When a puppy remains with the litter beyond this time - and without adequate human contact - its social adjustment to human society will be crippled, and what it learns will be learned from its litter mates. The optimum time for taking a puppy into a new household is at the conclusion of the puppy's seventh week. Because a pup's trainability

and learning facilities are operating at full capacity during the fourth critical period, it is better that a puppy does his learning from his new owner. And learn he will! The fourth critical period marks a time when a new puppy will learn at a fast and furious pace. And much of what he learns will stay with him a long, long time. What the puppy learns during the fourth critical period will help to shape him into the kind of dog he will be forevermore! That paragraph is so important that every dog owner (and those contemplating getting a puppy) should re-read it - and then read it again! For the readers who acquired their dogs at six months or more, that paragraph may well explain some of the negative characteristics in the personality and behavior of their dog. During the first three critical periods, significant brainwaves from a puppy can be recorded on electroencephalographs. The fourth critical period, however, is quite different. The first actual - and highly significant - waves can be recorded. It is during this fourth period that a bond will be established between dog and man that will have a lasting effect upon the puppy. During no other phase in its life will a canine have the ability to achieve a stronger bond than during the fourth critical period. A puppy's contact with people during this phase is the whole key to his emotional and social success within human society. In the tests conducted at Bar Harbor, puppies were isolated at various intervals during the five critical periods, and it was determined that isolation from human society had its greatest effect on puppies during the fourth critical period. Without adequate human contact during the fourth period, puppies became incapable of being trained and incapable of being companions to man. It is during this time that a puppy should be integrated into human society. At this time, a puppy should be taken for walks, meet people and be allowed to play with children and other animals (under supervision). During the fourth critical period, simple commands can - and should - be taught. There should be gentle discipline. Forceful discipline during this period could adversely tip the scales on which the puppy's emotional development now rests. A puppy (during this period) is learning to live in a human's world. He is learning to trust and have confidence in human beings. A puppy between the ages of 8 and 12 weeks does not deliberately get into mischief, a physical and forceful correction could result in complete confusion within the mind of the puppy. Faith and trust in his new human friends could be quickly shattered. When mistrust of humans develops during this fourth critical period that mistrust will remain a permanent part of the puppy's makeup. Because many people acquire puppies for home security purposes, I must digress for just a moment to put across a very important point. The preceding paragraph may cause some to assume that the best way to raise a puppy to be a watchdog is to isolate it from human society during its fourth critical period so it will distrust humans. But this is not the way to train a watchdog. It is one way to guarantee that a puppy will never be protective of anything. During the fourth critical period discipline should be confined to scolding. Scolding does not include shouting. Commands such as "sit", "stay", and "come" can be taught during the fourth critical period -but must be done so in a playful atmosphere. Housebreaking should be instituted in a gentle manner, insuring that praise is used for correct behavior rather than forceful correction for misbehavior. It is during the fourth critical period that puppies can develop what is generally referred to as "hand shyness" as a result of owners who feel that striking a puppy is the only way to discipline it. A puppy's environment should give him a sense

of security, being smacked around with rolled newspaper or human hands certainly will not achieve this. Mild restrictions should be imposed - such as not allowed the puppy to chew on furniture, shoes, etc. these mild restrictions could have the additional value of raising tolerance levels. Failure to discipline and failure to impose mild restrictions could have a serious effect on the puppy's upbringing and have deleterious effect on the dog's compatibility within the family later in life. In human society, we have what is known as kindergarten in our public schools. The purpose of kindergarten is to prepare a child emotionally for the learning that will take place later. Kindergarten and pre-school classes are, in effect, a training ground to teach children how to learn. The fourth critical period is the puppy's kindergarten. If a puppy is taught how to learn during the fourth critical period his actual formal schooling (Which can take place during or after the fifth critical period) will be more successful. A puppy given pre-school training during the fourth critical period will be able to learn more than a puppy that does not have pre-school experience. Although commands such as "come", "sit", "stay", "down", and "no" are invaluable when taught during the fourth critical period, perhaps the most important single response during that period is learning to fetch. Puppies who cannot - or will not - learn to fetch are dropped from guide dog programs. Moreover, dogs being trained to perform narcotic detection duties must first be proficient at retrieving. The significance of fetching cannot be over-emphasized. Explaining how such a game expands a puppy's mind and what willingness to fetch reveals about a puppy would require a book in itself. Learning to fetch in the fourth critical period can spell success or failure in your dog's desire and ability to work for you. The term "work" refers to any duties which involve specialized training. Failure to learn fetching does not mean that a dog will not be able to learn to respond to commands for everyday obedience, but stop and think for a moment if a dog is not smart enough to learn to fetch how then can he be expected to manage the more complex tasks of hunting, retrieving game, pulling a sledge, working stock, guarding a house, or detecting bombs? It is during this critical period that your dog will begin to test you to see just who the pack leader is going to be. He'll begin to bite you, in play, or as a real challenge to your authority. This behavior is natural in the pack and not necessarily undesirable. What is undesirable is an inappropriate response on your part. It is important, at this stage, that you establish your position as a pack leader and not just another sibling. Other behaviors such as grabbing at the leash will be observed, and all are attempts to dominate you. Biting in particular though should always be discouraged. Therefore, you should not wrestle or play tug of war. Such play is aggressive-inducing. What you see as a fun game may be perceived by your dog as a situation in which he has been allowed to dominate. Wrestling, of course, communicates to your puppy that he is allowed to bite you. Tug of war sets you up in a dominate confrontation over an object. He learns that he can keep objects away from you. During tug of war games, puppies will often growl, this is a dominance vocalization, designed to warn another pack member they better not confront the growler or he will bite. Puppies see these games as situation in which they have been allowed to dominate. They do not understand that these games designed by humans are to entertain them. You can continue to play with you puppy during this period, but - The relationship between you during the play must

change. No mouthing of your body should be allowed and when your puppy does mouth, you should respond with a quick and sharp "No" or "No Bite!" Play that does not get rough is best. If you cannot keep the puppy from getting overly excited during a game and he persists in biting at you, don't play that way, this will only stimulate additional dominant behavior in the future. For these reasons, this is the stage when serious training should begin. By training your puppy, you will learn how to get him to respond to commands designed to show that you are in charge. * include by Annette Neff. Rutherford and Neil. How to Raise a Puppy You Can Live With. and Monks of New Skeet. The Art of Raising a Puppy.

Fifth Critical Period: 12 - 16 weeks (3 to 4 months).

The fifth critical period is the 13th, through the 16th week of a puppy's life. A highly significant thing will happen during the fifth critical period, and puppy owners should be prepared for it. A puppy will make its first attempt to establish itself as the dominant being in the pack (family). It is during the fifth period that a puppy will learn whether he can physically strike out at his owner - and get away with it! If a puppy is allowed to get away with it, he will lose the confidence and the respect for the owner that developed during the fourth critical period. The tolerance level toward the owner will be narrowed. The puppy will learn that by rebelling he'll get things his own way. It is during this fifth critical period that authority will be challenged. It is here that the challenge must be met head on by the puppy's owner. Instructing people as to the best method of dealing with this problem is quite difficult because no two dogs are exactly alike. Disciplinary measures for one are not necessarily suitable for another. In my own training school the question is often asked, "What shall I do if my dog bites me"? My answer usually goes something like, "What would you do if your child hit you"? Heaps of love and understanding are not applicable here. A puppy must be shown swiftly and firmly that though his is loved, you the owner - are the dominant being. Formal obedience training should begin no later than the age of six months for optimum ease in teaching. This is not to say that a dog that has attained the age of 10 months cannot or should not be trained. As long as a dog is healthy, there is no maximum age limit for training; it is always easier to train a dog that has not had too much time to develop bad habits. Being aware to the five critical periods, providing the correct environment during these periods, and instituting proper learning techniques will allow a puppy to develop emotionally and socially to its full potential. Each time you marvel at a guide dog leading its blind owner through busy traffic, you can be assured that the five critical periods in that dog's life was handled with great care and concern. The puppy you acquire can grow up to be all the things he is capable of becoming, pay close attention to the critical periods in his life, these are the periods in which to shape and mould his character and personality. He is in your hands. What he is to become he will become during those five critical periods. Most formal obedience classes conducted throughout the country will not accept a puppy for obedience training unless it has attained the age of six months or more. It is unfortunate, however, that by the time some dogs reach six months of age they have already become problem dogs. Obedience training may or may not help, it will depend upon the severity of the problem and in too many cases, it will not. This is simply because

obedience training does not teach a dog to refrain from turning over trash cans, chasing cars, barking excessively, or tearing up the living room furniture; these bad habits are learned during the five critical periods.

The Pack Instinct.

The natural instinct of the canine is to try to assume dominance within the pack. As was stated earlier, he begins this during the fifth critical period, and the dog will periodically "test" the owner's ability to dominate. The fact that a dog will periodically test the owner's dominance does not mean that the dog does not love or respect that owner, however, if the owner is permissive and weak - thus allowing the dog to achieve dominance - his love and respect for the owner will quickly wane. The dog owner then becomes inferior in the dog's eyes and the owner is destined to be owned by the dog. The scales of love and discipline must be equally balanced. That is the magic formula for success in the rearing of any puppy.

Security: Prime Ingredient for Emotional Growth.

Although your new puppy may be destined to become the family dog, one member of the family should be designated the puppy's foster mother during the remaining critical periods in its life. This is not to suggest that other members of the family should be restricted in their association with the puppy, on the contrary, all should share in the joy of caring for -and playing with - the new arrival. But the bond between the puppy and its litter mother has been severed by removal from the litter. For optimum emotional development, the puppy should have the security of knowing which member of the human family has taken the litter mother's place. It is strongly urged that a child member of the family should not be given this responsibility if optimum emotional growth is to be achieved. Many children are presented with puppies to "help the child to develop responsibility", but in all too many cases, it does just the opposite; often children will find excuses why they cannot take the time to feed, water, train and care for their new charges. Dog pounds and humane societies (not to mention research laboratories) are filled to overflowing with dogs and puppies awaiting execution because their child-owners failed to develop the hoped-for responsibility. A puppy knows very well when it is unwanted and being unwanted brings insecurities to a puppy, just as it does to a human. Insecurities breed emotional problems; emotional problems during the puppy's critical periods will remain as personality faults throughout the dog's life. The personality faults can cause fear biters, piddlers, and runaways and perhaps complete emotional withdrawal from human society. To increase the puppy's security, he should have his own bed in a place where he can be alone when he wants. You must expect the first four nights to lend themselves to some inconvenience - for you and the rest of the family. Your new puppy will be lonely at night, having been accustomed to the presence of his litter mates, although the puppy may have been playful during the first day in his new household, nightfall -when you and the rest of the family have gone to bed -will give the puppy time to remember (and miss) his litter brothers and sisters. By the fourth night, however, the pup will have adjusted to his new

environment and to your family's routine. It takes just four days for the average dog to learn to adjust to a new environment.

Puppy Nutrition.

The scope of puppy's security must also include proper nourishment. All the hard work of preparing a complete and balanced diet has already been done for you, by the manufacturers of commercially prepared dog food. If you select a puppy food in which the label states, "complete and balanced for growth", you won't need to worry about adding vitamins and mineral supplements, they' will already been added. If you add more, you then run the risk of creating an imbalance of nutrients. Most vets will recommend vitamin and mineral supplements until a puppy reaches one year of age, if the puppy is eating what is known as a "maintenance diet". That is, a diet prepared for the daily maintenance of adult dogs. Your vet is your best consultant since he can examine your puppy personally and evaluate its nutritional needs. It is not the purpose of this book to get into the technical aspects of canine nutrition, but a proper diet for a puppy during the five critical periods of emotional growth is important. A puppy that is not getting enough to eat, getting too much, or not receiving the proper nutrients can hardly develop properly. Seventy percent of your new puppy's metabolism is water; he will need plenty of it - all the time. His water bowl should be cleaned each day. Water allowed to sit will develop scum, and diseases can result from an unclean bowl, such as gastrointestinal, just as it can from unclean feeding dishes. Dry, caked-up food can breed harmful bacteria. A clean water bowl and clean feeding dish will lessen the chances of gastrointestinal upsets and resultant vet bills, a puppy that is constantly thirsty - or constantly hungry - cannot feel very secure.

Socialization.

In bringing your puppy home when it is eight weeks of age, you must remember that it is in its fourth critical period. Your puppy must be socialized with the human element. Not just with you, but with other humans as well. Your puppy should be taken for walks in public; he should be allowed to meet people and be allowed to play with children (under close supervision). In too many cases, puppies are kept isolated from the outside world, they are not allowed to see just what goes on out there, their world consists of the inside of the house or the backyard. As they pass through fourth and fifth critical periods without proper socialization, great damage is done. Note: One should not let one's puppy mix with other dogs, or go places where dogs congregate until all Parvo inoculations are complete, preferably at 16 weeks, but it may be safe to let the pup socialize at 12 weeks as long as he is with inoculated animals.