

Guide to Raising a Charmer

A yearlong guide to your dog's socialization process.

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Babes in Pupland: 2 to 3 Months
Physical Growth: By 8 weeks, most puppies have full sets of baby teeth to enable them to munch easily on commercial dry puppy food. Their motor skills develop at an accelerated pace, as they progress from walking to running, rolling and playful wrestling. By 12 weeks, their neuromuscular system has developed so they are able to control their bladders long enough to urinate outside the nesting area and in an appropriate area outside.
Social Development: The peak time for puppies to learn doggy etiquette actually occurs between ages 4 and 12 weeks, say experts. Everything puppies see, hear, smell and feel will make lasting impressions and impact how they behave and react to situations as adults. During these two months, puppies will be less dependent on their moms and even attempt to challenge her authority. They learn to distinguish familiar people from strangers and realize that not every place is puppy-friendly. They begin to develop problem-solving skills, figuring out that the pantry houses treats and mastering the difficult task of stair climbing. Pay close attention to your puppy during weeks 8 to 10. Prior to 8 weeks, experts recommend owners desensitize their puppies to potentially frightening sounds such as vacuum cleaners or thunderstorms. Try introducing the vacuum cleaner as no big deal by placing a line of food treats leading up to the appliance while it is off. When it is on, feed your puppy treats within 5 to 10 feet of the vacuum. Play with your puppy, provide plenty of treats and act happy and unconcerned while playing a tape of a thunderstorm. Veterinarians identify this two-week stretch as the fear-imprint stage in puppies. Any experience that is traumatic, scary or painful to a puppy, such as fireworks, an altercation with another dog or an angry person, is likely to make a lasting impression and may affect how it reacts to similar stimuli later on as an adult. **Social Skill Tips:** Get physical with your puppy gently and frequently touch its ears, paws and belly. Examine its mouth. These touches will make trips to the veterinarian's office far less traumatic. Friendly handling also helps reassure your puppy that your hand is a friend, not a foe. Hoist your puppy on top of your washing machine (the slick surface and height resembles a veterinary exam table) and get it used to walking on plastic, metal and shaly surfaces. Expose your puppy to lots of different people, different settings (car rides, a friend's home) and different stimuli (vacuum cleaner noise, kitchen cooking smells and friendly older dogs). Introduce desirable behavioral habits, such as basic commands, and positive reinforcement, using praise and treats, to your willing puppy pupil. Lots of permanent learning takes place through interactive play with littermates, mom and people that can make a lasting impression. Enroll your puppy (up to date on all its necessary vaccinations) in a puppy kindergarten class at age 10 to 12 weeks to further hone its social development and learning. Begin teaching your eager-to-greet-by-leaping puppy to go into the sit stance when approached by someone. A 10-pound puppy that jumps at you may be cute, but it can grow into a 60-pound adult that will literally knock you over with its jump greeting.
Next Step: Juvenile Stage: 3 to 6 Months