



Living with a teenage dog

A CHALLENGING TIME FOR BREEDERS, OWNERS AND THE DOGS

Words: Barbara Hodel

Most new dog owners find puppyhood challenging, but they are getting the support of their breeder and a puppy pre school class. There is also the novelty and the children, who desperately wanted a puppy, are still on board. But once the cute pup turns into an adolescent delinquent, things can start to fall apart.

Owners seem ill prepared for the challenges of a teen-aged dog: the emotional response and over the top reaction to some stimuli, forgotten training, increased exercise requirements, need for more mental stimulation, ongoing socialisation and training, take owners by surprise.

That is also the time when breeders might get a phone call from their clients asking for help. It is important to give sound advice, as this is the time when dogs might be returned, or end up in pounds and shelters.

The dogs don't do it on purpose but their brain, to put it casually, is still under construction. They are not giving their owners a hard time, but they are having a hard time.

However, to reach the stability of adulthood they have to go through the teenage phase. We have to assume that, like in humans, parts of the cortex matures at different rates. The more basic functions mature first, whereas the parts in the brain responsible for controlling impulse or planning, mature later. Emotional responses, especially the urgency and intensity of the emotional reaction are affected during this time. Hormonal changes are another factor, even in desexed dogs. The dog is also figuring out his place in the family and the wider community.

These young dogs now spend more and more time at home in the backyard, because they are too boisterous to walk and often refuse to come back at the off leash dog park. They also have gotten into a few run-ins with other dogs. They now become unemployed and will soon be self-employed, meaning they dig up the backyard, eat the pool lights and bark at anything that moves. It is downhill from there and it becomes a self fulfilling prophecy.

Their social skills deteriorate further and their world becomes very small. They meet the same people and dogs over and over again and if they go out, it is the same old, same old. They stop interacting with new people or dogs and they 'forget' how to deal with new situations, or might get scared. Scared dogs are dogs who react inappropriately, or show aggression towards unknown dogs or people.

This pattern can be fatal! Behavioural problems seem to be the number one reason for euthanasia of dogs of any age and "it is still the largest cause of death of puppies under one year of age. Indeed, the average age of dogs in Australia, and worldwide, is estimated to be around 3.5 years, which is well below their potential biological age."

A large number of dogs are surrendered to shelters each year. One study puts the figure at a staggering 20%. The numbers of cats and dogs euthanized in Australia is equally staggering at 180,000 and other countries are no better.

But there are positive and effective ways of dealing with dogs during their teenage phase:

Keep socialising. While early socialisation is important it does not stop with a puppy pre school at 16 weeks. Teenage dogs need to be socialised on an ongoing basis. They need to meet new people and dogs, go to new places and have new and positive experiences. Attending a well run class for teenage dogs helps with ongoing socialisation, provides support and owners may realise that they are not alone.

Don't run them into the ground. A lot of owners try to solve the problem by literally 'running them into the ground' on a daily basis. However, they are just creating an athlete. The dog is now so fit that they cannot get them tired anymore, or worse, the dog is physically exhausted but the brain cannot settle.

Find a balance between mental and physical stimulation. Teaching them something new on an ongoing basis, such as tricks or a brush up on obedience skills is a good start. Using part of their food for enrichment in food dispensing toys,



NEWS

recycle plastic bottles, pizza boxes, paper rolls, etc helps too. Or, if so inclined, why not take up a dog sport: Agility, Obedience, Rally O, Nose Work, or Fly Ball.

Keep educating them. A classic is the couch. The dog is on the couch. The owner first asks the dog to get off, then the owner commands the dog to get off and then resorts to pulling the dog off, the dog growls or even snaps. Often this is the beginning of the end for a relationship. Firstly, the dog is not on the couch because he plans on taking over the household and then the world. The dog is on the couch because it is the most comfortable place and he has not been taught to go to his bed. If the dog is not allowed on the couch teaching a 'go to bed cue' is the first step. It is important that all family members are enforcing the same rules. Dogs do the wrong thing because they have not been trained properly or the wrong things are reinforced. The best way to address unwanted behaviours is to teach an alternate behaviour out of context, in this case, go to bed, and then gradually bring it back to the problematic situation. If necessary 'interrupt' (with their name) – 'redirect' (ask for an incompatible behaviour like sit instead of jumping) – 'reward' (treat, praise, toy, interaction) should be the go to approach if something goes really wrong.

Reward the effort. Despite all the bravado they are showing, young dogs are really insecure. Owners need to acknowledge the effort and reward all the good things instead of focusing on the bad stuff. Keep it positive.

Let them make choices, if safe and possible. A lot of dogs are not going to the off leash park anymore because they got into altercations with other dogs. If no one was hurt, the dog is not aggressive, he just needs more socialisation. Teaching a really reliable recall is the first step owners need to take, then the environment needs to be managed carefully and the dogs should be matched with suitable play mates. Hopefully the owners have attended a good puppy pre school that allowed for off leash interaction and are able to read body language and good play. Play should ebb and flow, roles are reversed, there are pauses, invitations to play are frequent (play bow, eye flashing, lifted paws etc). If it gets too rough the dogs have to be called back, asked to sit to calm things down and start again. If a dog shows aggression, professional help should be sought.



The good thing about teenage dogs is that this phase does not go on for years. With the right attitude, additional socialisation, training and a good sense of humour it may only last for a few months. They still might have relapses later, but hopefully not as bad and not as long.

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- 1 <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/health/publications/the-teen-brain-still-under-construction/index.shtml>
- 2 http://www.ava.com.au/sites/default/files/AVA_website/pdfs/NSW_Division/VETS%20%2B%20NURSES%20COMBINED%20-%20Kersti%20Seksel%20-%20Canine%20Cognitive%20Dysfunction.pdf
- 3 <http://www.vetwest.com.au/pet-library/socialisation-essential-for-puppies>
- 4 <http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/not-a-dogs-chance-campaigners-zero-in-20110917-1kfa.html>

Images

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Page 17: Image by Anaite