

## CRITICAL PERIODS IN YOUR PUPPY'S LIFE

by Bruce Sessions

Acquiring a puppy at the right age and providing it with the proper atmosphere during the critical periods of its life (when its character and personality are being formed) is the only absolute way that the man-dog relationship, character traits, and trainability can be predetermined and preordained.

Many people who acquire dogs at the age of six months, eight months, a year or even two years, are perplexed to find that their dogs just can't seem to demonstrate much of an emotional bond with their owner. Sometimes, they are shy--which usually results in a characteristic known as fear biting--or perhaps the reverse is true; overaggressiveness and bullyish tendencies.

Scientific studies have shown that there are five critical periods in a puppy's life. That is, five phases of mental development during which adverse conditions could cripple a dog emotionally for life. Conversely, positive conditions during these five phases will produce dogs of the highest caliber mentally and socially. So important were these scientific findings that the Guide Dog Foundation instituted these "positive conditions" for puppies being raised to become guide dogs for the blind. These dogs receive the most rigorous and exacting training of any dogs and therefore must be perfectly adjusted.

Dr, J. Paul Scott, Director of Animal Behavior Laboratory at Roscoe B. Jackson Memorial Laboratory at Bar Harbor, Maine, directed a project to determine just when these critical periods took place in a puppy.

An example of a person's failure to acknowledge and respond to these critical periods is shown in one particular test--extreme though it may have been. A puppy twenty-one days old was removed from the litter, and completely isolated. Although he was carefully fed and watered, his caretaker was careful not to play with him or even speak to him. The only toys the experimental puppy had were his water bucket and food dish. By sixteen weeks of age, he had had no contact with other dogs (except during the first twenty-one days of his life) and no human contact except for being fed and watered by a caretaker who barely acknowledged the pup's existence.

At four months of age, the experimental puppy was once again placed with his littermates. He didn't recognize them, either as littermates or as dogs. His isolation during the critical periods of his life--his complete removal from the companionship of other dogs and humans--had developed his character to such an extent that he never would adjust to the society of either. He had passed his period of being capable of adjusting socially.

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 the puppy's life, zero to twenty-one days. During this period, the 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 the first critical period, and it was determined that it was not. It was determined, however, that something nearly miraculous occurs on the twenty-first day and that it occurs in all dogs, regardless of breed. On the twenty-first day, all the puppy's senses begin to function. The senses were present in the puppy during the first critical

period, but were dormant. The twenty-first day of the puppy's life is like an automatic switch that "turns on" the puppy; it also turns on the second and possibly the most important critical period in the pup's life.

During the twenty-first to twenty-eighth day, the new puppy needs its mother more than any other time. The brain and nervous system begin to develop. Awareness begins to take place, and in this mental state a new puppy finds the world that surrounds him rather frightening. Things that happen can become frightening experiences.

A puppy removed from its mother during this second critical period will never attain the mental and emotional growth that he could and would have had if left alone? The social stress of being alive--and the awareness of it--has its greatest impact during this second critical period in the puppy's life; that is, between the third and fourth weeks.

It may seem peculiar to some that no other time in a dog's life presents the same proneness to such emotional upset, and that such upsets could have such a traumatic and permanent effect on his social attitudes. It is during this second critical period that the characteristic of nervousness can generate shyness and other negative qualities in a puppy. Once adverse and negative conditions have been allowed to develop during this second critical period--no amount of reconditioning or training later in life will alter or significantly modify the resultant negative characteristics.

The fifth to seventh week must be considered as the third critical period in the puppy's life. The puppies will venture away from home--not very far--and do a little exploring. At the beginning of the sixth week, the awareness of society will dawn. That is, the society of man and the society of dog. The puppy's nervous system--and trainability--are developing and by the end of this critical period will have developed to capacity.

During this third critical period, your puppy will learn to respond to voices, and will begin to recognize people. It is during this third critical period that a social "pecking order" will be established among the puppies in the litter. Some of the puppies will learn to fight for food--they'll learn to be bullies. The littermates that are cowed by the 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. Puppies that remain with littermates after the seventh week will develop bullyish or cowed tendencies which will remain with them into adulthood.

The third critical period ends during the seventh week, and the puppy is now considered emotionally developed and ready to learn. The "trainability system" within the dog is ripe and is operating to capacity. What he learns during the fourth critical period will be retained and become a part of the personality and characteristic of the overall dog. If the puppy is left with the mother, its emotional development will be crippled. It will remain dependent upon her, but in her will find very little security, since she will begin to totally ignore the puppy.

If the puppy remains with the litter beyond this point, and without adequate human contact, its social adjustment to human society will be crippled, and what it learns will be learned from the littermates. The optimum time for taking a puppy into a new household is at the end of the seventh week and the beginning of the puppy's fourth critical period. This fourth critical period extends into the twelfth week of the puppy's life. Since the puppy's trainability--or learning facilities--are operating at full capacity now, it's better that he does his learning from his new owner. And learn he will! The fourth critical period marks a period of time when the

new puppy will learn at a fast and furious pace. It's much better that the things the puppy learns at this point--and at this important period in his life--be constructive. What the puppy learns now will shape him into the kind of dog he will be forevermore.

The puppy's character traits and personality will develop so rapidly during this fourth critical period, that what he learns will become permanently fixed, and will influence his attitude toward people and other animals for the duration of his life.

Through the first three critical periods, no significant brainwaves from a puppy can be recorded on electroencephalographs, but the fourth critical period is different. The first actual, and highly significant, brainwaves 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 his life will he have the ability to achieve a stronger bond than during this fourth critical period. His contact with people during this phase is the whole key to his emotional and social success within the human society!

In the tests 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 the puppies during this fourth critical period. The results were puppies which became incapable of being trained, and incapable of being companions to man.

It is during this fourth critical period that the puppy should be socialized with the human element. Not just with the new owner, but other humans as well. The puppy should be taken for walks out in public. He should meet people, be allowed to play with children and other animals (under controlled supervision).

It is during this critical period that simple commands should be taught. There should be gentle discipline. Forceful corrections during this period could adversely tip the scales on which the puppy's emotional development now rests.

He's learning to live in a human's world. He's learning to trust in, and have a confidence in human beings. A puppy this age does not deliberately get into mischief! He does not know he's doing anything wrong. A physical and forceful correction could result in complete and utter confusion within the mind of the puppy. Faith and trust in his new human friends could be quickly shattered.

Discipline should be confined to verbal scolding, whenever it's necessary. Verbal scolding does not include shouting.

Commands such as "sit", "stay", "come" should be taught in a "gemlike" atmosphere. Housebreaking should be instituted in a gentle manner, ensuring that praise is used as a reward--the primary training tool--rather than forceful correction. During this fourth critical period, the absence of praise serves as a meaningful correction. It is during this period that puppies can develop what we generally refer to as "hand-shyness." The puppy at this age is learning about human beings, and what he learns about them should always be constructive. Children should not be allowed to scare the puppy, nor handle him without being closely supervised.

The puppy's environment should be such that he develops a sense of security. The mild restrictions we impose upon him, i.e., not allowing him to chew on furniture, shoes, etc., will have the additional value of helping the puppy develop proper tolerance levels. Tolerance levels are so important that the U.S. Army institutes carefully controlled tests on puppies for the purpose of raising these tolerance levels.

In our human society, we have what is known as kindergarten in our public schools. The purpose of kindergarten is to prepare the 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. Likewise is the fourth critical period in the puppy's life, the eighth to twelfth week.

If he is taught how to learn during the fourth period, his actual formal schooling (which should take place during the fifth and final critical period) will be so successful that he will learn much more easily and rapidly. He will also be able to learn more than a puppy that does not have pre-school experience.

Although the "come", "sit", "stay" and "no" commands are invaluable if taught during the fourth period, perhaps the most important single response during this period is learning to fetch. At first glance, this may sound unnecessary and unimportant. It should be pointed out however, that puppies who cannot learn to fetch are dropped from the Guide Dog Program. Moreover, adult dogs being trained as Marijuana Detector Dogs, and Bomb Detector Dogs, must first learn to fetch. A dog that cannot learn to fetch or refuses to learn, will not become a detector dog or guide dog. The significance of fetching cannot be overemphasized. How such a "game" expands the puppy's mind, and what such willingness to fetch reveals about the puppy, would require an article 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 fifth and final critical period is from the thirteenth to sixteenth week of the puppy's life. A highly significant thing will happen during this critical period, and the owner should be prepared for it and ready to handle it smoothly and with confidence. The puppy will make his first attempt to establish himself as the "dominant being" in the "pack" (family). It is here--in this fifth critical period--that the puppy will learn whether he can physically turn on his owner and get away with it!

It would be well to point out here that if he is allowed to get away with it, he will lose the confidence and respect for his owner that developed during the fourth critical period. The tolerance level toward his owner will be narrowed. He'll learn that by rebelling, he'll get things his way. It is during this fifth critical period that absolute authority will be challenged. It is here that the challenge must be met, head-on, by the dog's owner. Instructing people as to the best method of dealing with the problem is difficult because no two dogs are exactly alike. Disciplinary measures for one dog are not necessarily suitable for another.

In dog training schools, 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?" Suffice it to say that the new puppy will challenge your authority during the fifth critical period and try to establish himself as the dominant being. He should be shown swiftly and firmly that, though you love him implicitly, by all that's holy, you are the dominant being, and there's only room at the top for one!

Formal obedience training should begin during this fifth critical period if the full potential of the puppy's intelligence and companionability is to be realized. It should be pointed out that trainers should be selected with great care.

Being aware of the five critical periods, and providing the correct environment during these periods--as well as instituting proper learning techniques--will allow a puppy to develop emotionally and socially to 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 of that dog's life were handled with great care. The proper emotional and environmental factors during the critical periods were the criteria for the successful performance of the dog.

When you bring your puppy home, the critical periods which will follow will be critical periods in your life as well. The way you handle these critical periods will determine what kind dog someone else will have. If the puppy you acquire doesn't grow up to what you wanted him to be--if he has strange quirks in his behavior which embarrass or distress you--he may end up being passed around from home to home. Chances are, no one else will be satisfied with those quirks either.

Who can enjoy the dog who rolls over on his back and piddles at the approach of a stranger? Who can be satisfied with the dog who wants to bite anything that moves? And perhaps most important of all, who can be satisfied with the dog that refuses to give of himself, his devotion, his loyalty, and his love?

The puppy you acquire can grow up to be all the things want and desire him to be--if-you acknowledge and adhere to the critical periods in his life. Those are the periods which shape and mold his character and personality. He is in your hands. What he is to become, he will become during the critical periods.