

Adolescence in Dogs

What is it?

Adolescence marks the change from being a juvenile to becoming an adult. This is how nature prepares a young animal to go off into the world on their own, so you may notice behaviors that support survival like increased independence (running off more), increased aggression (starting scuffles with other dogs), increased social desires (desperate to interact with all the dogs), and increased curiosity (not coming back when called as easily, spending more time investigating).

During this time there are dramatic hormonal changes and a reorganization of the brain.



An additional “sensitive period” may be noticed at the start of adolescence due to the brain reorganizing itself, so be careful about using reprimands and harsh training techniques, and be wary of putting your dog in situations they are not comfortable with. If they have a bad experience at this stage, it could stay with them for life.

When is it?

Adolescence can start anytime between 6 and 12 months and can end between 18 and 24 months. The size of the dog can affect how soon and how intense the dog goes through these changes. Larger breeds tend to start maturing later and go through it slowly, with less intensity, whereas smaller breeds may start earlier.

Testosterone in males starts to increase at 4-5 months of age and continues until 10-11 months, then starts to decrease until it reaches the adult balance at around 18 months of age.

Females have an increase in testosterone around the same age, as well as an increase in estradiol.

What to expect?

Both males and females will have an increase in vasopressin, oxytocin, dopamine, and testosterone. Females also have an increase in estradiol.

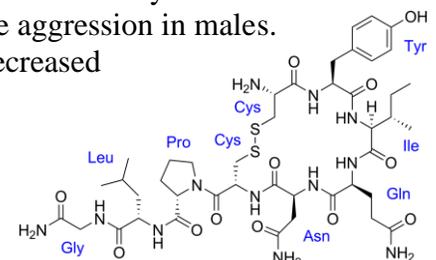
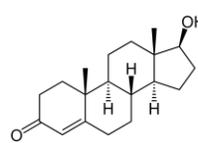
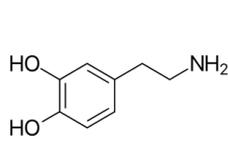
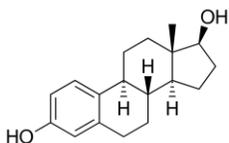
Vasopressin - Could lead to an increase in sexual and proactive aggressive behaviors.

Oxytocin - Increase the importance of social bonding.

Dopamine - Increases effort/desire, and can make a dog more likely to experience frustration and excitement.

Testosterone - Can lead to more sensation seeking behaviors and higher sensitivity for external rewards in both males and females. It can also lead to higher proactive aggression in males.

Estradiol - Seems to lead to an increase in risk taking behaviors and decreased inhibition.



These hormonal changes can make adolescent dogs appear less obedient, however, what is really happening is that they're increasingly motivated to explore, interact and run. They have a greater need to interact with the environment around them and the people in it.

Just like human teenagers, adolescent dogs have the energy and motivation to do more. More exploration, more play, more interaction with their friends, but they lack the necessary knowledge and experience to think about and manage their actions and reactions.

Because teenage dogs are so much more energetic and interactive they can easily find themselves in conflict when they are asked to stop doing something, or simply to calm down, even in situations when they previously were 'obedient' and responded immediately. Sadly, this kind of change is often interpreted by owners as the dog being stubborn or trying to assert their dominance rather than understanding that their dog is finding it difficult to control their impulsivity.



What to do?

Train through it! Continue practicing the behaviors your dog has learned already; it's ok if you have to go back a few steps in some situations to help them succeed. Performing the basic behaviors, they have learned while they work through their crazy hormonal changes is a challenge, even though it may not seem like there's anything different happening on the outside! When they were younger it was easy for them to listen to you, but now their brain is insisting these other behaviors are more important for survival.

If your dog used to play with other dogs but is becoming too boisterous or even aggressive, it's ok to not let them interact with new dogs for the next few weeks/months. Some dogs will seem desperate to interact with other dogs, but repeatedly end up starting altercations – this is likely due to a mix of the oxytocin making them want to be more social, and the testosterone and vasopressin increasing some aggressive behaviors.

If your dog has doggy friends, you can continue to socialize them with the dogs they know. Avoiding repeated negative experiences in the presence of other dogs will help stop the problem from getting worse. If your pup continues to practice poor behavior with other dogs, the problem could become a habit, and will be much harder to change once they are fully mature.

If your adolescent dog seems to have lost their 'manners' - think about how to provide more positive activities, avoid exposing them to situations that may excite or frustrate them, avoid any kind of punishment, and be patient. **This phase will pass!**