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## **Newsletter Spring 2011**

# **All about Puppies!**

### **Puppy Development: Stage 4**

3 - 6 Months

Stage 4 begins your puppy's introduction to independence, but may also create some possible frustrating situations for you. With her senses more or less fully developed, and her improved physical coordination, the puppy is entering into a phase that is remarkably close to toddlerhood in human beings. Think "terrible twos" on a canine level.



During this stage, the puppy will attempt to determine the social rankings within her new "pack". This may include the same kind of play-fighting that she engaged in with her brothers and sisters, but now directed at you and the rest of her new "littermates." In wild packs, these kinds of dominance games serve a vital function. Puppy is testing her boundaries within her social circle, seeing if she has what it takes to physically challenge her peers and even you, her pack leader. If you don't step in and discourage this kind of dominance-seeking behavior early on - or, worse yet, if you allow your puppy to "win" at dominance games such as wrestling or Tug-of-War - it could set the stage for more serious challenges to your leadership down the road.

Play-biting may also escalate during this stage, and it should be considered vitally important to correct this behavior rather than allow it to continue. Be sure to correct immediately to allow the puppy to connect the behavior with the correction, and be consistent!

Between months 4 and 6, you may find your puppy exhibiting signs of a return to the flight phase that she went through during or around week 8. However, unlike at 8 weeks, when the puppy's flight was fueled by her reaction to the startling new environment, this new phase will be more closely associated with the independent and rebellious stage that she's going through. A collar and leash will provide the crucial physical connection between you that can keep her from bolting when you approach. Do not allow her to roam off leash in any open or highly populated public area until she demonstrates to you that she is willing to accept your commands. And don't forget your most powerful tool: your calm-assertive energy and balanced pack leadership!

Hide your designer shoes! During stage 4, you can expect your puppy to begin teething, which means that unless you provide her with suitable chew toys to occupy herself and relieve her discomfort, she is liable to destroy some of your treasured belongings. Many people take this kind of destructive behavior as a form of "personal" rebellion by the puppy, but think about it. Doesn't it make sense that the puppy would seek out as attractive items that are most saturated with your scent? If your puppy does find and mangle a precious possession of yours, DO NOT react with anger! Remember to maintain balance and provide firm, calm corrections. Once you have corrected your puppy, immediately provide her with an acceptable substitute to make the connection in her mind. Frozen bones may provide pain relief for a dog in great discomfort and also a reward for responding to your corrections with calm-submissive energy.

During this stage, many new owners become concerned by the sight of blood on their new puppy's chew toys. Don't panic. This is a completely natural part of this phase of the puppy's development as she begins to lose her milk teeth. Still, if you have persistent concerns, be sure to discuss the matter with your family veterinarian. Ask about proper dental care - when and how to brush (ideally once a week or more) and which products to use. Certain products such as raw bones may be perfect both for soothing the dog's chewing instincts and for removing plaque and tartar buildup around her teeth and gums.

Finally, this stage will usher in the beginnings of sexual maturation in your puppy, which may lead to some extra frustrations. Marking and scenting can become a problem around the house even if the puppy has been successfully housebroken. The best and safest way to avoid these problems while simultaneously decreasing the chances of many future health risks is to have her sterilized if you haven't already done so. Sterilization is a still debated topic among many dog owners and veterinarians, but most veterinary professionals agree that a safe and optimal time to have the procedure done is when the puppy is about 6 months old.

Written by Caesar Millan.

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