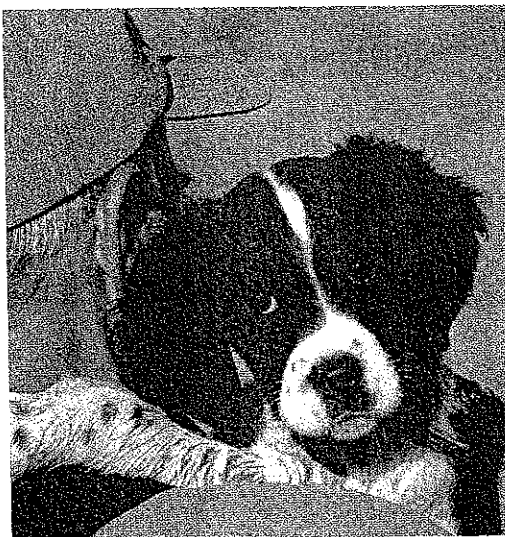


The First 20 Weeks

The first 20 weeks of a dog's life and the way the dog is introduced to the world around it are critically important. During this stage of psychological development, the young dog can develop good habits through proper training and environmental control. Conversely, puppies are monumentally impressionable at this time, and it may take only one incidence of a negative association to scar the pup forever. During the imprinting stage, the pup is learning what works for it. Thus, few repetitions of a specific behavior followed by perceived positives (cause and effect) may forge a desired response to future stimuli, commands and/or similar places or circumstances. It is the owner's responsibility to understand the subtle stages of the imprinting period and open the dog's mind to ensure better response to future training.

A dog that has not been exposed to certain things and improperly exposed to others during critical periods will never reach its full potential. During the imprinting stage there are a number of well-documented critical periods. The ability of a dog to learn to live with people and other dogs ends at 12 weeks of age, with the most critical period for developing positive associations with humans being from six to eight weeks. A dog denied positive human contact before it is 12 weeks old likely will make a poor companion. Studies have demonstrated that pups totally isolated from people for their first seven weeks still can become normal and develop proper social skills. Additional studies have shown that human contact for only 20-minute sessions a couple of times a week is adequate to create normal development—as long as these sessions take place during the critical stages before the pup is 12 weeks old.

As trainers, we need to understand and be able to recognize the critical developmental periods throughout the imprinting



A young pup should be exposed to the outside world in steps that match well-documented phases of development.

stage. We should implement programs designed to maximize our dogs' abilities to learn. Stages are not finite in each dog; it's important to recognize that each pup has unique prenatal and neonatal stimuli and is influenced by its genes as well as its mother's hormones. However, the concept of critical periods and sub-stages can serve as an excellent guideline. The ability of an individual trainer/owner to recognize and identify what is taking place in a dog's mind still will come into play.

The prenatal period is the time that the fetus spends in its mother's womb. There are indications that bitches that experience high levels of stress during pregnancy produce pups that demonstrate behavioral extremes and decreased abilities to learn. Obviously, then, it is important that a healthy bitch be properly fed, exercised and housed in a proper environment.

The neonatal period occurs from birth to two weeks of age. At whelping, the pup's brain is not fully developed. During this period, the sensory abilities of scenting, hearing, seeing and touching

are poorly developed. The way the mother treats her pups at this stage will have a lasting effect on the dogs' minds.

During the transitional period, from 14 to 28 days, the sensory abilities turn on and a pup's awareness of the world around it begins. The pup receives stimuli from its environment that can affect it for the rest of its life. During the neonatal and transitional periods, people play an important role in developing puppies' bodies and minds. By the transitional period, puppies should be regularly handled and picked up.

Drs. John Paul Scott and John L. Fuller are co-authors of *Genetics and the Social Behavior of the Dog*, the 500-plus-page classic volume that describes 20 years of research into genetic and environmental influences on the behavior of dogs. They attribute 65 percent of a dog's behavioral characteristics to management, training, socialization, and the nutrition and overall health of the dog.

The US military's "Super Dog" program—originally known as Bio Sensor and developed to improve the performance of dogs used for military purposes—documented that neurological stimulation occurring from three to 16 days following whelping has a profound and lasting effect on a dog. Recommended stimulation includes tickling between the toes and holding the pup perpendicular to the ground (body vertical), both with its head up and head down. Further exercises should include cradling the pup on its back with its nose pointing skyward in the palms of the hands. Puppies exposed to stress during this period become more adept at handling stress later when encountering new situations, training or corrections.

The socialization period occurs when the pup is four to 12 weeks old. Weaning the pup from its mother's milk and exposing it to outside influences are critical to

sculpting the pup's personality. If a four- to six-week-old pup is not socialized with other dogs, it probably will be fearful of dogs. Similarly, if a six- to 12-week-old dog is denied human contact, it will lack proper social skills with humans.

Picking a 14-week-old pup from a breeder is risky business. If the puppy has been properly exposed and developed in each of the aforementioned critical periods, super. However, if the pup demonstrates fear, nervousness, a lack of confidence and boldness, or skittishness around people or dogs, don't shackle yourself with this "project." No matter what the price—even if the dog is free—this prospect is no bargain.

During the socialization period, the pup should be exposed to things and situations that it will encounter down the road. At Grouse Wing we expose our pups to new grounds, the chain gang, four-wheelers, horses, vehicles, the house, birds and more. The greater the number of exposures, the more likely the pup will demonstrate improved social skills, emotional soundness and an open mind.

During socialization there's a "fear period" that normally occurs around eight to 10 weeks. At this time the pup is much more inclined to permanently associate fears. The pup that is frightened now may take a long time to return to normal—if it ever fully recovers. If the pup has not been properly developed, anything with which the pup associates the fear may remain a stimulus throughout the dog's life.

At Grouse Wing, we take the fear stage seriously. We do not introduce dogs to horses, birds, four-wheelers or discipline during this stage. Furthermore, we do not separate pups that we are keeping from one another until after 10 weeks. We make it a point to work with and handle juveniles individually, and the youngsters romp and play together in an environment that they know and are confident in. I do not like to ship a dog during the eight- to 10-week period; too many variables can make future training more difficult. I advise prospective buyers to let us keep pups through 10 weeks before they take delivery. Of course, knowledgeable buyers can prepare pups properly, in part by avoiding fear-based associations during this period.

I mentioned that we expose our puppies to new grounds and places during the socialization period. This is in conflict with what many vets advise. The medical community advocates that a pup

should not be exposed to other dogs, kennels or new grounds until two weeks after its final vaccination. However, it is imperative for proper development of the immune system that a puppy vaccination be given after 14 weeks of age. We give three leptospria vaccines, the last at 18 weeks. A dog isolated past 12 weeks from the world it is going to live in— from woods, fields, water, strangers and other dogs—will not maximize the development of its mind and trainability.

If a dog's sole role is to be human-oriented, the vet's advice is sound. For a hunting dog, however, the advice is counterproductive. It is sage to avoid other dogs that aren't healthy and areas known to be high-risk. I would stay away from truck-stop pet rest areas but would go to the bird fields, woods and water.

After 16 weeks, the pup becomes less susceptible to a one-time negative association. After 20 weeks, the imprinting stage is really on the downside. A dog's personality is pretty much made by five months of age; the rest is teaching. After 12 weeks, the pup should explore independence. The pup that bonded with you and stuck with you like glue now would rather run through the fields without concern for what you want. If the pup has been properly developed in the neonatal, transitional and socialization periods, now is the time to lay the groundwork for more advanced training. Basic obedience, exposure to pressure, proper introduction to the remote e-collar, and creating good habits and behavior are all taught in the 12- to 20-week period. A dog that is exposed to pressure when it is 12 to 16 weeks old will handle pressure much better as it gets older.

By introducing good habits, enforcing compliance and rewarding success, we can mold the dog into the partner we are seeking. When the dog is 12 to 20 weeks old, mix birds and fieldwork with yardwork. Don't baby or spoil the dog or let it blow you off. Short repetitive sessions of yardwork will pay huge dividends down the road. If the dog does not learn to learn, to take mild pressure, to handle stress and to look to the owner for direction in this phase, a window is forever closed. By implementing yardwork at this age, you will be able to train with less pressure. And less pressure is definitely better.



For more information about George Hickox or his training methods, visit www.georgehickox.com.