Vet HQ

Is My Puppy Normal or Will he Just Grow Out of It?

A new puppy is a great companion. During the Covid pandemic, we have seen an enormous increase in the number of new household companions. It has become really noticeable the huge range in puppy behaviours. Just like in young children are not all the same, there is a huge range, some are confident, some are shy, some are worriers and some just cruise along. How do we know that they are tracking into a “normal” life or will they have problems?

What is normal or abnormal?

To say normal/ abnormal sounds very black and white, a yes or no behaviour. Instead, we use neurotypical – this is a range of behaviours. It is a bell curve, with at one end of the curve lying the confident, robust puppies. They go up and say hi to everyone, checking out new things, exploring, if something weird happens they go “ ohh that was strange, no worries” but continue to want to be involved.

In the middle of the bell curve, lie the puppies that are relaxed, may get a little worried at new events but generally bounce back and want to get involved. At the other end are the puppies that hang back a little, less confident to greet new people or explore. At the very tail end of this group are the puppies that are of concern.

Puppies learn very quickly; they are like sponges for information. This is particularly true their socialization stage between 4-14 weeks of age. They are

learning every day, being exposed to new things e.g. how to behave like a dog, what behaviours are appropriate and not appropriate, how do I tell another dog if I want to play and if I don't want to play. They are also learning the same thing with people. How do I interact appropriately with a human? How do I interact with a puppy, with an adult dog?

Fear

They are learning about the world, that the weather changes, that plants vary, that smells change, that wind make noises. It is not unreasonable to think with all these changes that fear may develop. However, if that fear does not lead to any impact for the puppy (either adverse or neutral = nothing happens) then it is unreasonable for this fear to persist. This is a type of learning called habituation.

Here's an example:

You turn the blender on in the kitchen. Your puppy, that has never heard a blender before goes " wow that's loud and a bit scary, that's outside my normal range of experience". This is reasonable fear. You turn the blender off, then the puppy thinks "Nothing happens to me, the sky didn't fall down, it didn't hurt me, actually that thing had no impact on me I don't need to be fearful". This is called habituation. This is a typical learning experience.

What is unreasonable is if the blender goes on every day and nothing ever happens to the puppy but it becomes progressively more fearful. Excessive or persistent fear towards stimulus that has time and time again shown not to have an adverse effect is a cause of concern.

This is true even for vet visits. Excessive fear in the clinic at an early age is a flag.

Aggression

All puppies mouth and bite a little and they occasionally break skin. They have sharp teeth and are learning how to control and use them appropriately and will occur in the context of play. This is appropriate and a learned behaviour.

Bite inhibition is something taught in puppy class.

However, when a puppy growls, backs away or lunges at people or animals that are either familiar or unfamiliar, or becomes aggressive and possessive over toys or food then this should be a flag towards excessive levels of aggression.

Repetitive or compulsive behaviours

e.g. tail chasing, pacing or circling are flags for non-neurotypical behaviours

Why Should I Worry? It's Just a Puppy, It'll Grow Out It? Won't it?

A neuro typical puppy will grow in confidence through positive experience. They find it easier to play with other puppies and greet people. They feel comfortable to explore. They become more resilient in the face of difficult experience e.g., if they have a run in with an adult dog that snaps at them, they may be rattled but they bounce back and realize that not all dogs are like this and will go off and find someone else to play with.

A puppy that is tracking to the anxious side will **not** learn well from positive experience. They may meet 25 lovely people who give them treats and say hello but they still find people scary or pay more heed to negative experiences or lack experience through not being brave enough to venture out to experience new things.

Behavioural change can also occur around sexual maturity 6-9 months and social maturity one and half to 2 years. Social maturity is when adults have developed their personalities. Often non neurotypical puppies will change when they reach social maturity e.g. those puppies that are avoidant and scared may gain a little more confidence as adults and instead may start to exhibit fear aggression as they start to signal for people/ things to stay away from them. If these signals are missed, then aggression towards the approaching figure may occur.

Extreme anxiety and fear rarely improve with age in a non-neurotypical puppy.

Can we do anything in puppies to avoid this?

- Identify puppies with extreme behaviour : trust your vet. They are used to seeing many different puppies and can give you warnings. The vets will encourage owners to monitor how well their puppy is learning and reacting to new experiences. Keep checking in with your vet.

- Don't leave it too late, because the brain is growing and developing and this is the best time to intervene before the brain completes development
- What if I'm wrong and this is not an "abnormal puppy" and I act – you will be providing emotional support to a puppy that is at the shy end of the bell curve. This will be beneficial anyway.
- What if I don't act and it is abnormal – the behaviours will get worse and rectifying these may be more difficult in the future.
- Is medication an option – in some cases it is as there are puppies with brain chemical deficiencies, but in other cases it may be a matter of training and desensitization training.

If you have a new puppy and have any concerns, please come and see us at Vet HQ or ask about our puppy preschool.

Dr Caryn