

An Introduction to Canine Behaviour

The biological background of dogs (*canis lupus familiaris*)

To better understand our four-legged family member let's start by reviewing where it all began – the biological history of domesticated dogs!

The domesticated dog is derived from *Canis lupus*, although we often adopt the fiction that domesticated dogs are a species unto themselves. The many different dog breeds in existence are as different from each other as they are from their Grey Wolf ancestor, but we do not refer to them by different specific names.



Canis is a genus of canids containing multiple extant species, such as wolves, dogs and coyotes. Species of this genus are distinguished by their moderate to large size, their massive well-developed skulls and dentition, long legs, and comparatively short ears and tails.

Canis Lupus currently has 38 subspecies, including the Dingo, the European wolf and the domesticated dog.

Dogs are carnivores. There are three main criteria that need to be met for an animal to be considered a true carnivore and our dogs meet them all. They have four canines used to hold and tear food, they have carnassials which are teeth that work together to provide strong shearing actions and then the part of the skull that indicates exceptionally strong jaw muscles, sagittal crest.

Selective breeding has allowed us to have the variety of breeds, sizes and shapes that we see today.



What makes up a dog's character?

Now that we've learned a bit about our dog's biological history, let's review the other important factors that make up our dogs.

Their genetic make-up

Dog's behaviour can be composed by a multitude of different contributors throughout their lives. First, we look at genetics; this is the part we cannot control. A dog's genetics can be influenced by their parent's behaviour and specific breed group characteristics.

Dogs can change physically and psychologically through selective breeding. If we look at the various purposes for which different dogs were originally bred, and then list the characteristics required to achieve those purposes, it makes sense that there will be a variety of behaviours in our dogs – and why some breeds are more challenging for our every day lifestyles than others!

Let's take a look at terriers and hounds as examples. Terriers were bred to hunt, catch and kill small animals. Terrier breeds vary greatly in size from just 1 kg to over 32 kg and are usually categorized by size or function. They originated in Great Britain and Ireland and were used to control rats, rabbits and foxes, some of the larger breeds were used to hunt badgers.

Many of the terriers were known to have different jobs and some were crossed with herding dogs, hunting dogs and fighting dogs. Terriers are very high energy breeds and can have very high prey and chase drive. They are usually characterized by traits like tenacious, feisty, persistent and courageous.

Hounds – including beagles, Afghan hounds and Dachshunds – were bred to assist in hunting due to their speed and great sense of smell. They were bred to hunt in packs or alone without the assistance of a human. There are three types of hound, with several breeds within each. Sighthounds (also called gazehounds), which follow prey predominantly by speed, keeping it in sight; these dogs are fast and assist hunters in catching game. Scenthounds, which follow prey or targets by tracking their scent; these dogs have endurance but are not fast runners. The remaining breeds of hound follow their prey using both sight and scent; they are difficult to classify as use the skill sets of both sighthounds and scent hounds. As a result of breeding for these distinct traits – namely independence and hunting capacities – many hound owners frequently face issues controlling their dogs on walks.

This is why it is important for pet owners to do research into the breed group characteristics and breed tendencies of their companion dog prior to adoption to ensure they are prepared to provide appropriate enrichment opportunities to satisfy their dog's innate desires.

Experiences

Then there are the experiences a dog has; which we can control. By providing our dogs with exposure and experiences with people, animals, and to the environment (places, surfaces, sounds, etc.) we can impact their development and future behaviours.

There are key timelines in their development that will shape their future behaviour. Things like strong attachment to locations and companions for a dog comes within the first 6 – 7 weeks of age and stress at 6 – 7 weeks of age affects a puppy's ability to learn. By 8 ½ weeks a puppy should have a location and substrate preference for elimination, and by 5 – 8 ½ weeks puppies should begin leash walking. Social exposure should be early, rigorous and always positive!



PERIOD	DURATIONS
Fetal	Up to birth
Neonatal	0 – 10 days
Transition	11 – 21 days
Socialization	3 – 12 (- 14) weeks
Fear	8 – 10(- 12) weeks
Juvenile	~3 months to puberty (5 – 14 months)
Juvenile/Adolescent Fear	3 weeks between 4 – 11 months
Adolescent	Puberty to social maturity (~2 – 3 years)
Adult	Social maturity to 7+ years
Senior	7+ years

The chart above provides an overview of the developmental periods that dogs go through. The three most important periods are the Socialization and Fear periods. These are the most crucial stages in a dog's development. Socialization and Fear periods can shape how our dog will be when they are older. During the socializing period, it is very important that a puppy is introduced to variety of people, dogs, animals, objects and situations. If this opportunity is missed, a puppy will most likely be fearful of these things.

Socialization and exposure is a lifelong process for your pup. Even a well-socialized young puppy might regress if positive exposure does not continue into adolescence (between 1 to 2 years old). As the puppy gets older and becomes more suspicious of novelty, positive exposure is equally important. Strive to have at least 3 to 4 positive experiences a week with the juvenile and adolescent dog.

For more information on proper puppy socialization, please register for our [Puppy Socialization](#) classes.

Learning

Providing positive learning experiences by making them fun instead of just neutral is the greatest thing we can do to shape our puppy's behaviour. Advocate for your puppy to ensure they are in a safe learning environment! You'll learn more about this in our socialization resources and that is where you come in! It is important that we are aware that dogs have and need a socialization program as outlined above but that this program should continue all throughout our dog's life.

Being aware of common behavioural signs, physiological symptoms of stress as well as how and when to intervene if needed is vital for keeping our human-animal bond as strong as it can be.

