

## Does my puppy have a problem?

By Chris Puls

When a person gets a puppy, they usually have certain expectations for what that puppy will be doing when it grows up. It might be a companion, an agility star, or win Best of Show. But sometimes those dreams take a detour very early in the puppy's life.

Puppies under 16 weeks of age should be naïve, outgoing and happy, loose and wiggly balls of fur (with sharp teeth). They should have a desire to explore, taste/chew things and investigate. Everything is new and exciting to them. But this is not the case with all puppies. Some pups show signs of behavior issues to come. By recognizing these warning signs, you can sometimes help the pup overcome them, or lessen the effects of their genetics or lack of critical stimulation. If you see the following warning signs in a puppy under 16 weeks of age, please get a full medical check-up to rule out health related causes, and if none are found then please speak with a behaviorist that does not use any physical punishments.

- 1) **Alarm barking with lunging and hackles raised**- This is not normal behavior for a young pup under 16 weeks of age of any breed and should not be encouraged. It could be a sign of fear issues or it could have a neurological cause.
- 2) **Frequent avoidance of new things (people, animals, objects)** - Puppies should be very inquisitive at this age. They may show a bit of caution, but should not be trying to avoid or get away from most new things they encounter. This indicates a fear issue that will only get worse without intervention. If left to progress, or if punishments are used as a response to this behavior, the odds of the fear turning into aggression can be high.
- 3) **Aggression**- This refers to non-play behaviors. Some play behaviors mimic aggression so if you aren't sure, have an experienced trainer take a look. If the pup is showing teeth and growling, followed by a lunge and bite with a quick retreat, that may be serious. Aggressive responses at a young age are not something the pup will grow out of.
- 4) **Shy, quiet, withdrawn pup**- This is most commonly caused by medical issues (worms, fever, etc.) or by fear. Puppies should be lively and "into everything" and full of energy. Even in the breeds that are known for laid-back dispositions as adults.
- 5) **Freezing**- If the pup is commonly going stiff and refusing to move, that is a sign of excessive fear. This needs immediate training without punishing the pup for being so afraid.
- 6) **Serious bites in response to handling**- It's normal for pups to mouth or chew hands that might be trying to hold them still when they want to wiggle or checking their paws or ears. But if the pup is breaking skin, growling or persistently trying hard to bite you, talk to your vet (pup might have pain) or a behaviorist.
- 7) **Inability to settle in a crate**- It's normal for puppies to vocalize and get a bit stressed when first confined to a crate. But they should settle after an hour or so. It can help to put a thick blanket with your scent on it in the crate with the pup as long as he/she is not trying to eat it. Introducing crate time during meals can also help the pup learn that the crate is a good place to be. But if the pup doesn't stop moving and continues to be restless, biting at the crate bars, digging, vocalizing, etc. for hours then there may be an issue.

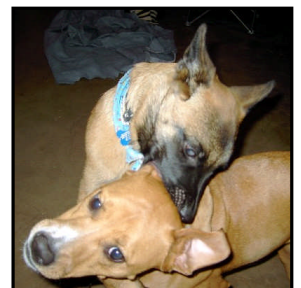
8) **Urinating for no apparent reason-** It's normal for submissive pups to urinate when they get excited or overwhelmed, just do your best to keep greetings brief and low-key. But if the pup is urinating while sleeping or when no one (and no other dog) is near, get the pup to the vet. It's likely the pup has an infection or some other medical issue.

9) **Repeated elimination in a properly sized crate-** Often puppies that have spent too much time in a small crate or cage will not get a chance to get outside as often as needed. So they learn to just eliminate in that space whenever they feel the urge. It is usually a learned behavior so as long as there is not a medical cause, the pup CAN be taught when and where to eliminate. Puppies can only be expected to "hold it" for 1 hour for every month of age + 1 hour. So a 1 month old pup can hold it 2 hours. A 2 month old pup can hold it 3 hours. If the pup is being crated for longer periods, it's not the pup's fault that it can't hold it. It HAS to be let out frequently for house training to work.

10) **Self injury, attempts at escape, excessive destruction of bedding-** If a puppy is self-mutilating (excessive chewing or licking of its body to the point of injury) or if it tries desperately to get out of an area, away from its person or out of confinement, there is likely an issue. If the puppy shreds anything put in the crate, it may be a sign of boredom leading to the development of bad habits, or it might be a medical or neurological issue.

If you see any of the above warning signs, please let the vet know and if needed, meet with a certified behaviorist. Puppies are not born knowing what humans consider right and wrong- they are born with certain behaviors that make them puppies. But sometimes those normal behaviors aren't so normal. And if these warning signs are showing up before 16 weeks of age, the earlier you get help, the more likely you will be able to help the pup develop correctly.

Unfortunately, some pups just turn out to have really bad "wiring" just as some humans have neurological issues. Some can be helped with the same types of medications used to treat similar human issues. But the issues may prove to be more than you are willing to deal with. You are not doing the pup any favors by ignoring the warnings and hoping the issue will go away. As the pup gets larger and stronger and more coordinated, the issues get worse if left unaddressed. So please start with a vet visit and consult. Maybe the issue is easily treated, but if not, have at least 1 meeting with a behaviorist. When you have a better understanding of the causes and treatments/training that will be needed, then only you can determine what is best for the puppy. Be honest with how much time and money you are willing to invest. The odds of someone wanting to take on a puppy with behavioral issues are low, so don't put your hopes there. You also need to consider the liability if your dog has aggression issues. If you have children or elderly folks living with you, or visiting frequently, their safety must come first.



If you are willing to invest some time and some money, you may be able to help your puppy grow up to be a normal dog. Or at the least, you will better learn how to manage your dog and the things the dog is exposed to so that what "triggers" a reaction is minimized while still allowing the dog to lead a normal life.

The American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior (<http://www.avsonline.org/avsonline/>) can help you find someone in your area. If there is no one in your area, some do phone consults.

The American College of Veterinary Behaviorists (<http://dacvb.org/directory/>) is another resource.