



# Help!

## I don't like my dog!

Did you know the most common age of dogs dumped in shelters is between 9 and 14 months old? Did you know that the dogs I am most asked to help with are also within this age bracket? That's because teenage dogs are difficult to live with. Few books mention this and owners aren't expecting their cute 'puppy' to turn into a challenge.

The dreaded teens can result in dogs who refuse to respond to commands they knew well a few months before. Recall can become non-existent. Chewing and destruction – with bigger, stronger jaws – can rear its ugly head. Confidence levels in your dog may result in challenging behaviour with you, the owner, strangers, or even other dogs. Hormones, vital for mental and physical maturity, can wreak havoc in your dog's brain and body. It's not his fault, but it is annoying. You'd be forgiven – in the short term at least – for admitting to not liking your dog very much! It is a phase, it does pass and you can get through it with your relationship intact. Here's how!

### **Keep the crate!**

Crating is a wonderful way to keep puppies secure and safeguard against bad chewing habits. But puppies have the attention span of a gnat so the damage they do is usually little and often! Teenage dogs can work on one chewing project for up to an hour or more. To make matters worse, their jaws and teeth are much stronger than a puppy's razor sharp but relatively weak gnashers. Offer plenty of consumables for your teenage dog to chew on (antlers, filled and frozen Kongs, dog safe roots, raw bones) but don't even consider getting rid of the crate until your dog is at least 15 months old. When you can't supervise, use your crate.

## Use a long line for off leash time!

Just like human teenagers, dogs of this age can get cocky and show their independence. They know the daily routine on walks. They know where you park your car at the start of the walk. If, like most pet owners, you do the same 4 or 5 walks all the time, they even know how to get themselves home if they get lost. Owners can become less significant than they were with a small, relatively insecure puppy whose social attraction was to his human. To reinforce the early training and remind your dog that it's always compulsory to come when called, use a long line for off leash time. Feed only the fastest and most enthusiastic recalls and surprise your dog with a high value jackpot on rare occasions (roast chicken).

Since teenagers can go off food as a reward at this stage – the environment is much more exciting – use the Premack Principle of learning, which teaches, if your dog does something you want (sits calmly by your side, comes to you when you call him, walks to heel etc) he gets to do something he wants (explore the garden after a cats been through, resume sniffing a grassy patch, running free, swimming, greeting a friend etc). Now train, retrain and train your recall again with no option for your teenage dog to ignore you or make the wrong decisions!



## Walk with calm, well-adjusted adult dogs

Teenage dogs become attracted to other dogs as potential mates, or potential competition, so interest in other dogs can peak at this time. Adult dogs tolerate all kinds of silly behaviour in puppies. From about 16 weeks however, dogs stop smelling like pups and start to smell like adults. From approximately 6 months, hormonal changes mean a dog who still displays rude or pushy social signals with other dogs is likely to get himself into serious trouble. Whether on or off leash, allowing your teenager to run up and greet every dog you meet is, quite frankly, dangerous.

So it's often a good idea until hormones calm down, to be extra careful on introductions with other dogs and avoid dogs you don't know. I also advise avoiding other younger dogs, as they rarely have the maturity to teach good social signals and will often wind your dog up, raising adrenalin levels and increasing the likelihood of out of control behaviour and fights. It's still vital to continue socialising your dog during this stage, so find several calm, indifferent, mature dogs as walking buddies. Ones who will teach your teen good doggy manners and communication skills.

## Teach greeting according to your dog's temperament

You will never make a friendly dog unfriendly by adding control to your greetings. Equally, you'll never convince a shy or nervous dog to like humans, by passing him around from person to person, or allowing strangers to loom over him or try to touch him. Would you enjoy being stroked by a stranger? Whichever personality your teenage dog has, added confidence at this age is likely to result in him getting into trouble when greeting strangers so it's important to teach an appropriate greeting.

Over-enthusiastic teenage dogs who are almost fully grown, could potentially really hurt someone if greetings are not controlled. In

addition, some dogs I see can get pushy and certainly get a thrill out of physically moving people with their strength. Work hard on self-control so your dog learns manners. When on leash, teach 'I stop, you stop and sit' when people approach and offer high value rewards in the presence of strangers. This should outweigh your dog's desire to mug unsuspecting folk as they pass. If the distraction is too much, move further away and start again.

Shy or nervous dogs, who started off as puppies hiding behind their owners legs and backing away from things which worried them, often become confident enough during this teenage period, to actively tell strangers to 'back off'. It is your job, as the owner, to protect your dog so that they don't feel the need to protect themselves. On meeting strangers out and about, discourage any approach and don't allow people to touch your dog. Instead, teach your dog to sit calmly by your side or behind you, and feed extra tasty treats in the presence of strangers. Offering a food treat from the strangers hand, is a dangerous habit to get into, as some dogs will be torn between wanting the food, and getting too close to the scary person. Then when something they can't cope with happens – a hand tries to stroke them – they're close enough to bite!

## Try free shaping, for fun bonding time and mental stimulation

Teenagers hate to be nagged. Teenage dogs are no different. You may find yourself in a stand-off with your dog, as he acts as though he's never heard the word 'sit' before. Clicker training is a great way to get your teen interested again and during a free shaping session, the dog ultimately does whatever he likes and

gets a click/treat for anything you like. This can be a paw lift, a head turn or a body movement, or interaction with a particular object. Once the dog realises that he's controlling the session by getting you to click/treat because of something he's doing, you can hone in on one particular behaviour and strengthen it, as he gets more click/treats for that action, than any other behaviour. Since you're not telling the dog what to do, or even asking for pre-learnt behaviours, teenage dogs love this game. They feel they have some control over the interaction and so are more willing to join in the fun. Plus, it's mentally challenging and should help keep your teenager out of mischief as he'll be tired after the session. Look on the internet for '101 things to do with a box' to start you off.

### **Be aware of the spooky stage**

As dogs enter their teen stage of development (from 6 months onwards), they can develop fear issues over things which previously they would have been happy to be around. It's important to continue careful socialisation during the first 2 years of their life, as they can become de-socialised with people, other dogs and new situations. Spooky reactions by the dog during this stage, often result in the owner avoiding certain situations, which only makes things worse. The use of classical conditioning, coupling new or worrying events with tasty treats, at a safe distance, can

help build the dog's confidence and work on continuing the socialisation you started during puppyhood.

Teenage dogs do grow up. By the time a bitch is 2 years old and a dog is 3 years, they are usually fully mature and you'll breathe a sigh of relief that you've got them to that age without killing them, or having them kill themselves. It's a bit like teenage kids really, you're obliged to love them, but it's ok to not like them very much from time to time. Following the simple tips above should save your sanity, and improve your relationship with your dog. It's most definitely worth it!

**A word of warning, dogs don't grow out of aggression, so any challenging behaviour which is leading to your teenage dog growling, snarling or biting, please seek the help of a qualified positive trainer or behaviourist.**

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*Sue McCabe Muttamorphosis Dog Training with Sage, Guinness & Lucky.*