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## **Environmental influences on the dog's behavior**

Environmental influences are responsible for about 60% of a dog's behavior. Meaning, that a dog's behavior depends for 60% on what it learns and experiences during its life, especially in the first few months after birth. They learn and experience their entire lives, although, the older the age the slower the learning process becomes.

The ways dogs learn are by: A. observing and copying, B. trial and error, and C. training. The first and most common way of learning is through observing and copying. Puppy shepherd dogs are good examples as they learn much of their herding skills by observing the adult dogs at work and then copy their behavior. Learning through trial and error is when a dog tries out something and this will be rewarded or not, such as when trying to open the garbage can. In case it succeeds and some delicious left-over is found, big chance the dog will do it again. But when consistently receiving nothing or a nasty experience the behavior will stop. By means of training we can actively influence the learning process of our dogs by reinforcing desired behavior and ignoring or correcting undesired behavior.

This learning process starts already when still a fetus in the mother-dog's tummy, as it is able to pick up her moods. It has been discovered that mother-dogs which were (highly) stressed during pregnancy, whether due to an improper environment, character or both, produced puppies that were more fearful or puppies with lower learning abilities and increased emotional states of mind.

During the first two weeks of age the puppy completely depends on its mother for warmth, food, grooming, contact comfort and even defecation. The brains are still developing, and eyes and ears aren't open yet. This does not mean that the puppy can't learn. On the contrary, it has been found that puppies being exposed to small amounts of mild stress during this period, such as gentle stroking, light flashes, balance differences (lifting) and small temperature differences, are quicker in problem solving, make fewer mistakes and 'keep their cool' better later in their lives. Also the mother's behavior plays an important role as a nervous and stressed mother affects the development of her puppies' minds in a negative way.

In the next two weeks the eyes and ears open up. The puppy learns to sit, stand, walk and start wagging its tail, bark and growl for the first time. The puppy becomes aware of the environment around it.

Once a puppy can see, hear and walk an extremely important period starts which is called the socialization period. It runs basically from 3 to 12 - 14 weeks of age. It is in this period, that the dog learns it is a dog and develops its social and communication skills such as the bite inhibition, displays of dominance and submission, calming- and play signals, interaction with other dogs, animals and

human beings, etc. And as curiosity is opponent to fear it is THE period to habituate the little animal to all sorts of environmental elements. Further, through play coordination is stimulated, skillfulness and mental flexibility promoted, inventiveness stimulated and problem solving taught. Dogs (young and adult) use play to establish their social status, i.e. their place on the hierarchic ladder.

By the time the puppy reaches the age of approximately 7 weeks, it is well capable of starting the training process, although, I prefer to talk about the education process. The general believe that a dog can only be trained (educated) from the age of 6 months and up is a complete myth. For becoming a well-behaved and well-adjusted dog, a puppy need to learn more than only a few basic commands. As you can read above it also has to be well-socialized and integrated in human society. Desired behavior should be stimulated and undesired behavior prevented. Further, a relationship between the owner and the dog based on mutual respect and trust should be build up. Therefore, a proper education of a dog can not be successful without the owner's involvement in the whole process.

The building blocks of the dog's future behavior are laid during the socialization period. It has been proven that puppies raised in sensory rich environments have better developed brains. Dogs lacking proper experiences with humans, dogs (of all sizes and varieties, not only to one or two breeds), other animals and/or different environments, have not only smaller brains but are also more likely to show disturbed behavior: they are clumsy in reading other dogs' communication signals, are tense, asocial or antisocial and are often scared in unfamiliar situations. As a consequence, they are more prone to dog-dog or dog-human (fear) aggression.

Over the next few months of life the experiences it has gained during the first three months should be confirmed and extended. Regular play, socialization and interaction with other dogs, animal species and environmental elements (also after the socialization period) builds confidence in the dog, improves its communications skills and maintains its soft-mouth. Only in this way, it will learn the relevance of the learned behaviors and how to use them. Luckily, the dog's mind is still very malleable and even when it has missed one or two things it may still be able to adapt to new impressions. Nevertheless, certain fear behaviors can already be imprinted for life due to lack of proper socialization.

By the time the dog reaches full maturity, between the age of 1 to 4 years (depending on size and breed), in principle, the behavior patterns are set and the best time to teach the dog new tricks is over. That does not mean that older dogs can't learn and experience. The process just goes slower and it depends a lot on what it has experienced at early age.