

Adolescence is ruff for dogs too

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Dr Lucy Asher and her dog Martha. Credit: Glen Asher-Gordon

New research led by scientists from Newcastle University and the University of Nottingham has shown that typical teenage behaviour doesn't just occur in young humans—it happens in dogs too.

The study, headed by Dr. Lucy Asher from Newcastle University, is the

first to find evidence of adolescent behaviour in dogs.

The researchers found dogs were more likely to ignore commands given by their caregiver and were harder to train at the age of eight months, when they are going through puberty. This behaviour was more pronounced in dogs which had an insecure attachment to their owner.

But Dr. Asher, a Senior Lecturer in Precision Animal Science, in the University's School of Natural and Environmental Sciences, warns adolescence can be a vulnerable time for dogs as many are taken to shelters for rehoming at this age.

"This is a very important time in a dog's life," she explains. "This is when dogs are often rehomed because they are no longer a cute little puppy and suddenly, their owners find they are more challenging and they can no longer control them or train them. But as with human teenage children, owners need to be aware that their dog is going through a phase and it will pass."

The team, which also included researchers from the University of Edinburgh, looked at a group of 69 dogs to investigate behaviour in adolescence. They monitored obedience in the Labradors, Golden Retrievers and cross breeds of the two, at the ages of five months—before adolescence—and eight months- during adolescence.

Dogs took longer to respond to the 'sit' command during adolescence, but only when the command was given by their caregiver, not a stranger. The odds of repeatedly not responding to the sit command from the caregiver were higher at eight months compared to five months. However, the response to the 'sit' command improved for a stranger between the five and eight month tests.

Further evidence was found when the team looked a larger group of 285

Labradors, Golden Retrievers and German Shepherds and cross breeds of them. Owners and a trainer less familiar with each dog filled in a questionnaire looking at 'trainability'. It asked them to rate statements such as: 'Refuses to obey commands, which in the past it was proven it has learned' and 'Responds immediately to the recall command when off lead'

Caregivers gave lower scores of 'trainability' to dogs around adolescence, compared to when they were aged five months or 12 months. However, again trainers reported an increase in a trainability between the ages of five and eight months.

The experts also found that in common with humans, female dogs with insecure attachments to their caregivers (characterised by higher levels of attention seeking and anxiety when separated from them) were more likely to reach puberty early. This data provides the first evidence of cross-species impact of relationship quality on reproductive timing, highlighting another parallel with parent-child relationships.

Dr. Naomi Harvey, co-author of the research from the University of Nottingham's School of Veterinary Medicine and Science and the charity Dog's Trust, says that whilst the results of this study may not come as a surprise to many dog owners, it has important consequences.

"Many dog owners and professionals have long known or suspected that dog behaviour can become more difficult when they go through puberty" says Dr. Harvey. "But until now there has been no empirical record of this. Our results show that the behaviour changes seen in dogs closely parallel that of [parent-child relationships](#), as dog-owner conflict is specific to the dog's primary [caregiver](#) and just as with human teenagers, this is a passing phase."

"It's very important that owners don't punish their [dogs](#) for disobedience

or start to pull away from them emotionally at this time" added Dr. Asher. "This would be likely to make any problem behaviour worse, as it does in human teens".

More information: Teenage dogs? Evidence for adolescent-phase conflict behaviour and an association between attachment to humans and pubertal timing in the domestic dog, *Biology Letters*, royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/10.1098/rsbl.2020.0097

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