



# Puppy Fitness

## That Fits The Puppy

Age Appropriate  
Exercise Guidelines  
Second Edition

By Jane Killion

*Director of the film "Puppy Culture -  
The Critical First Twelve Weeks That Can  
Shape Your Puppy's Future"*

# Puppy Fitness

## That Fits The Puppy

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There's an idea that's caught on like wildfire that exercise is some kind of panacea that will solve all behavior problems. Not only is this not true, it's led to a dangerous trend of owners pushing their puppies to inappropriate levels of exercise. So let's look at the Whys and Hows of appropriate exercise for puppies.

### Strong Minds In Strong Bodies

Exercise not only builds the puppies' bodies, it helps build their minds. As we detailed in our article on The Enrichment Effect (read it in The Learning Center at [www.puppyculture.com](http://www.puppyculture.com)), exercise has a very particular and important role in brain growth and improves learning, memory, and emotional response. But exercise that's not appropriate for a puppy's age and development can cause significant and irreversible damage. What would be a simple sprain in an adult dog could leave a puppy with a misshapen or shortened limb, so this is a subject that should be taken seriously.



# Understanding Puppy Bodies

## No Bones About It... Puppies Aren't Miniature Dogs

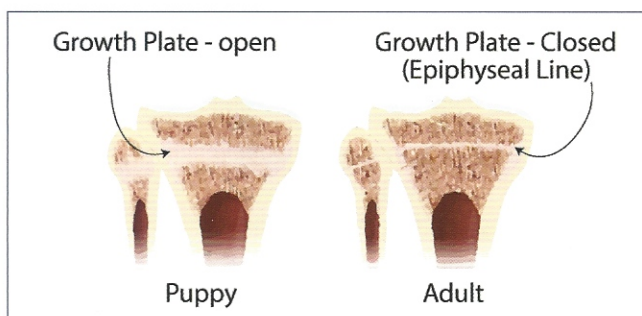
The first consideration with puppy exercise is something called "growth plates." Growth plates are soft areas that sit at the ends of the long bones in puppies and young dogs. They contain rapidly dividing cells that allow bones to become longer until the end of puberty. Growth plates gradually thin as hormonal changes approaching puberty signal the growth plates to close. In puppies, this closure is normally completed by approximately 18 months old.

Until the growth plates close, they're soft and vulnerable to injury. After sexual maturity, the growth plates calcify and the rapid cell division ends. The growth plate becomes a stable, inactive part of the bone, now known as an epiphyseal line.

A dog's bones are held together with muscles, tendons, and ligaments - soft tissue. In an adult dog, if a joint experiences a stress such as bending the wrong way or rotating too much, the bones will hold firm and a soft tissue will be pulled, resulting in a sprain. In a puppy, however, his muscles, ligaments and tendons are stronger

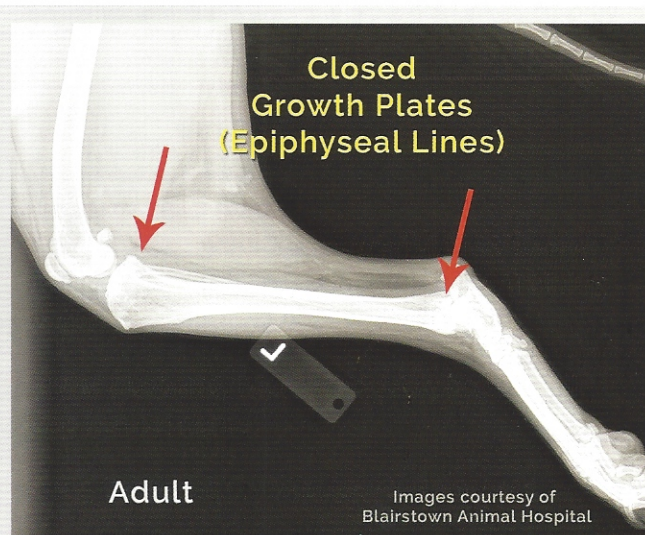
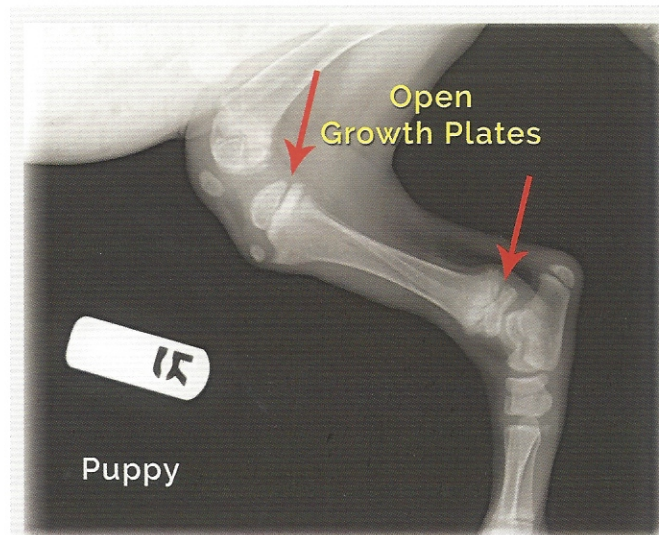
than his growth plates, so instead of a simple sprain, his growth plate is liable to be injured - the puppy's own soft tissue can pull apart his growth plate.

Why this matters so much is that, unlike a sprain, injuries to the growth plate may not heal properly or not heal in time for the puppy to grow up straight and strong. Injury to a growth plate can result in a misshapen or shortened limb which, in turn, can create an incorrect angle to a joint making the puppy prone to yet more injuries when he grows up.

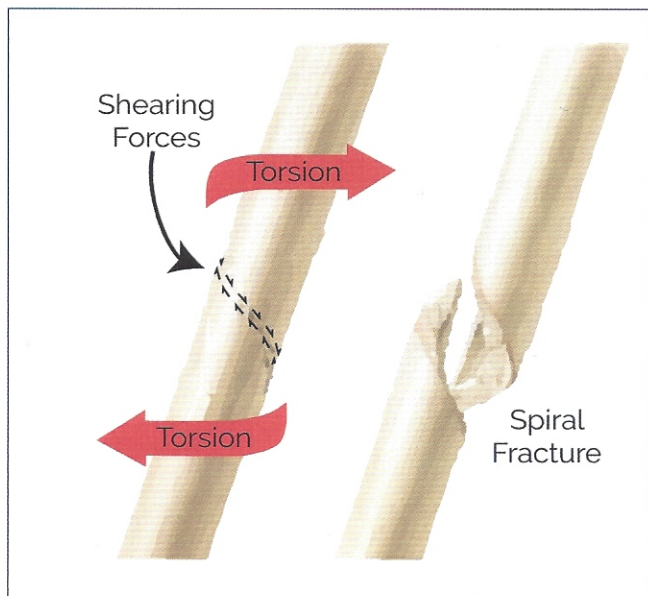


## Puppies Are Soft Core

In addition to having soft growth plates at the end of long bones, a puppy's bones in general are "softer." Dogs, like people, don't reach their maximum bone density until after puberty.



Spiral fractures of the tibia (lower leg bone) are very common in puppies - 50% of all fractures occur in puppies under 1 year of age. A spiral fracture is when the bottom half of the bone twists in one direction and the top half twists in the other.



This kind of juvenile injury is known as “Toddler’s Fracture” in humans, and it’s thought to be caused by the fact that the outside, fibrous layer of the bone (periosteum) is relatively strong in relation to the elastic bone inside. So any exercise that puts torque on (twists) a bone puts the puppy at risk for a fracture.

### Puppies Are In It For The Short Run

Puppies don’t have the cardiovascular system for endurance. Furthermore, until they mature, they’re probably not able to build much endurance no matter how much they exercise.

In human children, sustained exercise only increases aerobic capacity by up to 10%. In adults, that kind of exercise can increase aerobic capacity by up to 30%. Long walks and exercise sessions increase risk of injury and yield few benefits for puppies, so endurance training is better left until the puppies have grown up.

### Bubble Puppies Don’t Build Bone

After reading about growth plates and toddler’s fracture, you may find yourself clutching your puppy, afraid to let him move lest he breaks a limb. Relax! Not only is appropriate exercise not dangerous for your puppy, exercise has been shown to increase bone density in children.

Furthermore, those children who exercised were a whopping 50% less likely to fracture a bone as an adult. There’s every reason to believe the same holds true for dogs, so appropriate exercise is key to building strong bones in your puppy and preventing adult fractures. So let’s talk about guidelines for puppy exercise.

## Guidelines For Puppy Exercise

### Puppy Montessori

Self Directed Play is an overriding rule for any puppy under 18 months old. The majority of his exercise should be free play, exploring and noodling around. If he shows any fatigue, flops down, or refuses to walk, you should listen to him and let him rest.

*Never underestimate the value of a good digging session. Consider digging up a soft patch in a corner of your yard and burying “doggy treasures” in it - great natural exercise for your puppy!*



## Repetition Is Your Enemy

Probably the biggest cause of growth plate and soft tissue injury is repetitive exercise with a young puppy. So, until he's about 18 months old, long hikes and walks are out and lots of free-play sessions are in.

## Sniff 'N Stroll

While long hikes are out, just tooling around in the backyard with you is great. If you don't have a backyard, short, rambling walks are perfect. Let your puppy sniff, explore and take it at his own pace. You can intersperse short training sessions in your walks to work on heeling/loose leash walking, but the majority of the walk should be at your puppy's own pace and at his discretion.

Speaking of hikes, if you're an outdoorsy type of person, you should bring your puppy along on

hikes - its great socialization for puppies under 12 weeks old, and great enrichment for older puppies. But just like when you take a small child on a walk, be prepared to carry your puppy a good portion of the way. If you're jogging or walking on a manicured trail or paved park road, consider investing in a puppy stroller to put your tyke in for most of the walk.

## Trail Blazing

Kibble trails are also a great way to tire out a puppy both mentally and physically. Remember, dogs generally don't naturally go on long "marches" - they tend to noodle around and stop and sniff a lot as they go. Kibble trails allow puppies to stay outside a long time and cover a lot of ground in a very natural way. Walk a path with gentle curves in the back yard and drop treats every foot or so. You can keep a puppy busy

and moving along in a gentle and appropriate ramble for as much as an hour this way. Plus, it has the added bonus of being a problem solving task so it will tire him out mentally, as well as physically.

## Be A Puppy Matchmaker

Play with a well-matched and gentle playmate is ideal. Size is a factor, as a very large dog, especially one that likes to play with a lot of paw whacks, can inadvertently injure a young or small breed puppy.

That being said, a gentle Wolf Hound may be a better playmate than a feisty Jack Russell Terrier who likes to body slam. Keep a very careful eye out and be prepared to throw handfuls of cookies down to interrupt any overly physical play. Body slams and crazy rolls are spiral fractures waiting to happen!



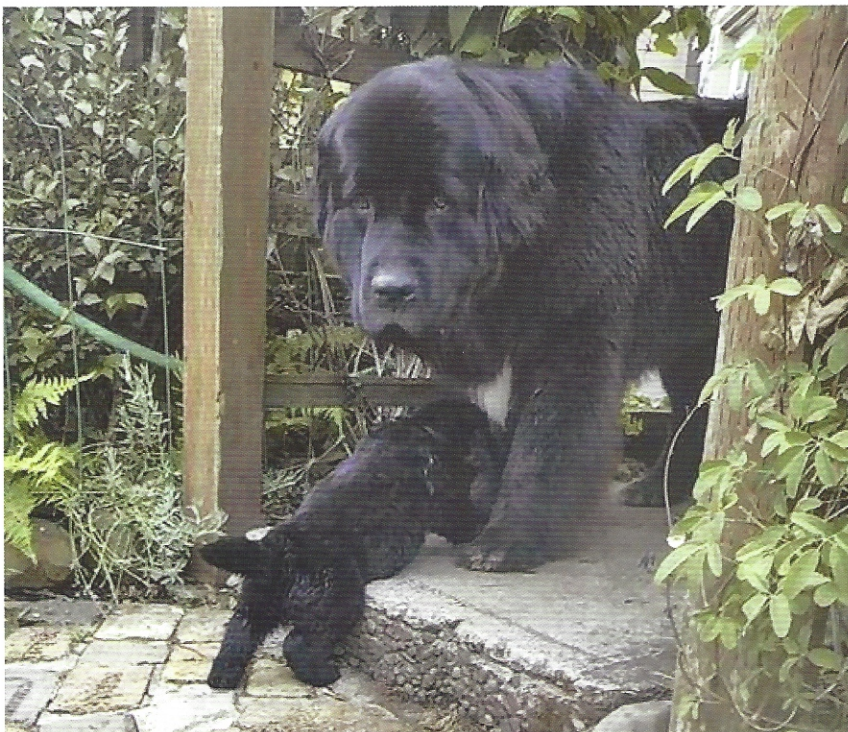
## Soft Landings

Jumping off of beds and couches are major causes of spiral fractures in puppies - we are constantly on guard until our puppies reach two years old and keep them off furniture and beds unless we're there to help them off. We also use heavy carpet pads and carpets around all furniture and beds to cushion impact, should a young (or old) dog slip by and get up on a high piece of furniture.

You can start training in agility but no jumping higher than wrist height until 6 months old, no jumping higher than elbow height until 18 months old.

## Stairs Aren't Hip

A study of 500 Newfoundland, Labrador, and Leonberger puppies found that puppies who climbed flights of stairs daily before they were 3 months of age had an increased risk of developing hip dysplasia. Although these breeds were selected for the study because of their relatively high incidence of hip dysplasia, the study seems to indicate that stairs represent a strain on any puppy's joints,



so consider ramps or carrying your puppy down stairs if possible.

## Be Early Over Hill and Dale

Interestingly, the same study found that off-leash self-directed exercise on gently rolling, varied, and moderately soft ground for puppies under 3 months old decreased the risk of developing hip dysplasia.



And it's important to get that exercise in early-free play after 12 weeks old, while certainly beneficial in general, was not shown to decrease the risk of hip dysplasia in the study. So, once again, self-directed play in your backyard or garden is the best exercise for young puppies.

*Although climbing flights of stairs on a daily basis represents an inappropriate strain on puppy joints, doing one or two not too steep steps with a non slip surface probably does not represent any risk to the puppy and may be a nice body awareness and coordination exercise.*

## Play Nice

Puppies often have more “will” than “way” when it comes to chasing toys and will not stop until they are literally on top of the toy, causing both heavy impact and twisting on the bones and soft tissue. We advise rolling balls or dragging toys on the ground for all puppies. Tug toys should be held low and steady - don't pull up or back on your puppy's neck!

*Puppy necks are delicate! Hold toys low and allow the puppy to pull rather than you tugging on the toy.*



## Help! I Need to Tire Out My Puppy!

Worried that you won't be able to tire out your puppy without long exercise sessions? Take heart, it's easy to tire out your puppy when you need to. Fifteen minutes of problem solving and training, particularly by free shaping behaviors will tire your puppy out more than an hour of exercise. (visit The Learning Center at [www.puppyculture.com](http://www.puppyculture.com) to read this article on-line with videos about physical vs mental exercise).

- We hope you share this with your friends, students, and puppy buyers - let's spread the word and make positive changes in the way people exercise their puppies!

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## About The Author

Jane Messineo Lindquist (Killion) is the director of “Puppy Culture: The Powerful First Twelve Weeks That Can Shape Your Puppies' Future,” as well as the author of “When Pigs Fly: Training Success With Impossible Dogs”.

Jane has had Bull Terriers since 1982 and she and her husband, Mark Lindquist, breed Bull Terriers under the Madcap kennel name.

For videos and further reading, visit The Learning Center at [www.puppyculture.com](http://www.puppyculture.com)

**PuppyCulture.com - WhenPigsFlyDogTraining.com - MadcapBullTerriers.com**

# Exercise Guidelines For Puppies

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**These are our best recommendations** based on the available studies and our 32 years of experience with Bull Terriers. Best practices for different breeds may not be the same.

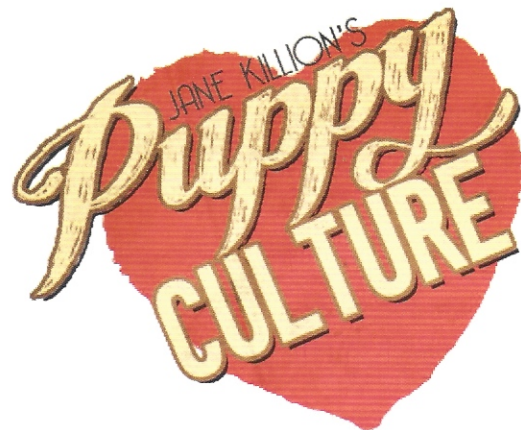
**I am not a veterinarian and this is not intended as veterinary advice.** You should always consult your breeder and veterinarian about the best exercise program for your puppy.

**There will be differences in recommendations based on your dog's breed.** Giant breed puppies' growth plates tend to close later while small breed puppies' growth plates close earlier.

**For any dog that you wish to enroll in a strenuous performance career,** we highly recommend doing x-rays to confirm growth plate closure before proceeding with any intense training.

**There are also breed-specific orthopedic concerns** which are not addressed here.

**If your puppy was neutered before 18 months old,** he will have some delay in growth plate closure, so you should adopt more conservative guidelines.





**8-12**  
weeks

# Exercise Guidelines For Puppies

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## Sustained and Continuous Walking

- 50-200 feet at a time.
- Break up with sniffing and noodling around.
- Formal heeling/leash walking training limited to 2 minutes.

## Sniff 'N Stroll

- Informal "sniff and stroll" sessions can be up to about 10-15 minutes.

## Noodling and Kibble Trails

- Puppy can go out in a safe yard and explore at his own pace or do a "Kibble Trail" as long as he likes.

## Running

- No directed running except for very short spurts in play.
- Puppy can run as much as he likes on his own.

## Jumping and Impact Activities



- Bars on the ground to halfway to wrist height.
- No more than one or two obstacles in a row.
- Wobble boards and unstable surfaces, but very low.
- Carpet all indoor stairs and never allow puppy to go up and down stairs unsupervised.
- Put up gates at top/bottom of stairs.
- Carry puppy if he needs to do more than one or two stair steps.

## Swimming

- Puppy should ALWAYS wear a life jacket.
- Wading and playing on the shoreline.
- Climbing on and off low platforms and rafts in shallow water.
- Retrieves/tossing toys in shallow water parallel to shoreline, never into deep water.
- Puppies should be allowed to swim if they volunteer to do so, but never forced.

## Chasing

- Roll balls and drag toys on the ground in gentle circles.

## Tugging

- Keep the toy low so the puppy's neck is in a straight line.
- Don't pull on the toy - allow the puppy to tug against you.

## Fast Turns

- No FAST turns or sudden stops.
- No fast weaves or lure coursing.
- We do begin SLOW shaping of weave poles but discontinue if the puppy shows any signs of speeding up or really "weaving" through the poles.

## Free Play with Other Dogs

- 10-15 minutes for formal "play dates."
- Puppy can have free access to other puppies and adults in the household (so long as the puppy is not harassing the adults).
- Keep bags of small dog treats on hand and throw handfuls of food down to interrupt rough or overly fast play.
- You may have to enforce rest periods by putting puppy away for naps.



**12-16**  
weeks

# Exercise Guidelines For Puppies

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## Sustained and Continuous Walking

- Gradually increase duration and length of walks, between 100-200 feet by the time the puppy is 16 weeks old.
- Let the puppy volunteer to keep going and stop if he shows reluctance to go further.
- Keep formal training under 2 minutes per session.

## Sniff 'N Stroll

- Can be increased to 15-20 minutes.

## Noodling and Kibble Trails

- Puppy can go out in a safe yard and explore at his own pace or do a "Kibble Trail" as long as he likes.

## Running

- No directed running except for very short spurts in play.
- Puppy can run as much as he likes on his own.

## Jumping and Impact Activities

- Bars on the ground to halfway to wrist height.
- No more than one or two obstacles in a row.
- Wobble boards and unstable surfaces, but very low.
- Carpet all indoor stairs. Don't let puppy go up or down stairs unsupervised.
- Put up gates at top/bottom of stairs.
- Consider carrying puppy if he needs to do more than one or two stair steps.

## Swimming

- Puppy should ALWAYS wear a life jacket.
- Wading and playing on the shoreline.
- Climbing on and off low platforms and rafts in shallow water.
- Retrieves/tossing toys in shallow water parallel to shoreline, never into deep water.
- Puppies should be allowed to swim if they volunteer to do so, but never forced.



## Chasing

- Roll balls and drag toys on the ground in gentle circles.

## Tugging

- Keep the toy low so the puppy's neck is in a straight line.
- Don't pull on the toy - allow the puppy to tug against you.

## Fast Turns

- No FAST turns or sudden stops.
- No fast weaves or lure coursing.
- We do begin SLOW shaping of weave poles but discontinue if the puppy shows any signs of speeding up or really "weaving" through the poles.

## Free Play with Other Dogs

- 10 -15 minutes for formal "play dates."
- Puppy can have free access to other puppies and adults in the household (so long as the puppy is not harassing the adults).
- Keep bags of small dog treats on hand and throw handfuls of food down to interrupt rough or overly fast play.
- You may have to enforce rest periods by putting puppy away for naps.



**4-6  
months**

# Exercise Guidelines For Puppies

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## Sustained and Continuous Walking

- Gradually increase duration and length of walks. Probably going to be between 200-400 feet at a time by the time the puppy is 6 months old.
- Let the puppy volunteer to keep going and stop if he shows reluctance to go further.
- Keep formal training under 2 minutes per session.

## Sniff 'N Stroll

- Can be increased to as much as 45 minutes by the time the puppy is 6 months old, provided you are moving at a very slow pace with lots of opportunity for the puppy to stop and noodle around.

## Noodling and Kibble Trails

- Puppy can go out in a safe yard and explore at his own pace or do a "Kibble Trail" as long as he likes.



## Running

- No directed running except for very short spurts in play.
- Puppy can run as much as he likes on his own.

## Jumping and Impact Activities

- Bars on the ground to halfway to wrist height.
- No more than one or two obstacles in a row.
- Wobble boards and unstable surfaces, but very low.
- Carpet all indoor stairs and never allow puppy to go up and down stairs unsupervised.
- Put up gates at top/bottom of stairs.
- Consider carrying puppy if he needs to do more than one or two stair steps.

## Swimming

- Puppy should ALWAYS wear a life jacket.
- Wading and playing on the shoreline.
- Climbing on and off low platforms and rafts in shallow water.
- Retrieves/tossing toys in shallow water parallel to shoreline, never into deep water.
- Puppies should be allowed to swim if they volunteer to do so, but never forced.

## Chasing

- Roll balls and drag toys on the ground in gentle circles.

## Tugging

- Keep the toy low so the puppy's neck is in a straight line.
- Don't pull on the toy - allow the puppy to tug against you.

## Fast Turns

- No FAST turns or sudden stops.
- No fast weaves or lure coursing.
- We do begin SLOW shaping of weave poles but discontinue if the puppy shows any signs of speeding up or really "weaving" through the poles.

## Free Play with Other Dogs

- Up to 20 minutes for formal "play dates."
- Puppy can have free access to other puppies and adults in the household (so long as the puppy is not harassing the adults).
- Keep bags of small dog treats on hand and throw handfuls of food down to interrupt rough or overly fast play.
- You may have to enforce rest periods by putting puppy away for naps.



**6-12  
months**

# Exercise Guidelines For Puppies

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## Sustained and Continuous Walking

- Walks on pavement should be kept short, but duration of walks on dirt or turf can be increased and more "hiking" type activities can be introduced.
- Again, best to keep doing these walks as "sniff and strolls" but you can increase sustained walking to up to 20-30 minutes on a relatively level, soft surface by the time the puppy is a year old IF the puppy volunteers to go that far.

## Sniff 'N Stroll

- Can be increased to as much as 60 minutes by the time the puppy is 12 months old, provided you are moving at a very slow pace with lots of opportunity for the puppy to stop and noodle around.

## Noodling and Kibble Trails

- Puppy can go out in a safe yard and explore at his own pace or do a "Kibble Trail" as long as he likes.

## Running

- No directed running except for very short spurts in play.
- Puppy can run as much as he likes on his own.

## Jumping and Impact Activities



## Swimming

- Jumps can be gradually raised half way to elbow height between 6 and 12 months old, with correspondingly more challenging ramps, wobble boards, and teeters.
- Platform work for rear end awareness can be introduced at this time very carefully and slowly.
- This is also the time when we see the most spiral fractures happen because the puppies have the wherewithal to get up on high couches and beds - be extra vigilant about not letting puppies up on high furniture without very close supervision!
- Stairs are always a hazard and should have good traction - carpet indoors, non-skid surface outdoors.
- Although the puppy may start doing stairs with good traction at this time, you should still supervise and don't let him run down the stairs with other dogs.
- Puppy should ALWAYS wear a life jacket.
- Wading and playing on the shoreline.
- Climbing on and off low platforms and rafts in shallow water.
- Retrieves/tossing toys in shallow water parallel to shoreline, never into deep water.
- Puppies should be allowed to swim if they volunteer to do so. Limit swimming to a few minutes at a time.
- Very short swim out to retrieves in the water.
- Keep the toy close to shore. High toy-drive dogs will swim further after a thrown toy than they can or should.

## Chasing

- Roll balls and drag toys on the ground in gentle circles.

## Tugging

- Keep the toy low so the puppy's neck is in a straight line.
- Don't pull on the toy - allow the puppy to tug against you.

## Fast Turns

- No FAST turns or sudden stops.
- No fast weaves or lure coursing.
- We do begin SLOW shaping of weave poles but discontinue if the puppy shows any signs of speeding up or really "weaving" through the poles.

## Free Play with Other Dogs

- Up to 20 minutes for formal "play dates."
- Your puppy's increased body mass can make him more liable to injury if he engages in body-slammng play or a lot of fast sprints and turns.
- Keep bags of small dog treats on hand and throw handfuls of food down to interrupt rough or overly fast play.
- Puppy can have free access to other puppies and adults in the household (so long as the puppy is not harassing the adults).
- You may have to enforce rest periods by putting puppy away for naps.



**12-18**  
months

## Exercise Guidelines For Puppies

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### Sustained and Continuous Walking

- Walks on pavement should be kept short, but duration of walks on dirt or turf can be increased and more “hiking” type activities can be introduced.
- Again, best to keep doing these walks as “sniff and strolls” but you can increase sustained walking to up to 20-30 minutes on a relatively level, soft surface by the time the puppy is a year old IF the puppy volunteers to go that far.

### Sniff ‘N Stroll

- OK to do 60 minutes provided you are moving at a very slow pace with lots of opportunity for the puppy to stop and noodle around.

### Noodling and Kibble Trails

- Puppy can go out in a safe yard and explore at his own pace or do a “Kibble Trail” as long as he likes.

### Running

- No directed running except for very short spurts in play.
- Puppy can run as much as he likes on his own.

### Jumping and Impact Activities

- The height can be changed to elbow height between 12-18 months with correspondingly more challenging ramps, wobble boards, and teeters.
- Platform work for rear end awareness can be continued at this time.
- This is also the time when we see the most spiral fractures happen because the puppies have the wherewithal to get up on high couches and beds - be extra vigilant about not letting puppies up on high furniture without very close supervision!
- Stairs are always a hazard and should have good traction - carpet indoors, non-skid surface outdoors.
- Although the puppy may continue doing stairs with good traction at this time, you should still supervise and don't let him run down the stairs with other dogs.

### Swimming

- Puppy should ALWAYS wear a life jacket.
- Wading and playing on the shoreline.
- Climbing on and off low platforms and rafts in shallow water.
- Retrieves/tossing toys in shallow water parallel to shoreline, never into deep water.
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- Very short swim out to retrieves in the water.
- Keep the toy close to shore. High toy-drive dogs will swim further after a thrown toy than they can or should.

### Chasing

- Roll balls and drag toys on the ground in gentle circles.

### Tugging

- Keep the toy low so the puppy's neck is in a straight line.
- Don't pull on the toy - allow the puppy to tug against you.

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- No FAST turns or sudden stops.
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### Free Play with Other Dogs

- Up to 20 minutes for formal “play dates.”
- Your puppy's increased body mass can make him more liable to injury if he engages in body-slammng play or a lot of fast sprints and turns.
- Keep bags of small dog treats on hand and throw handfuls of food down to interrupt rough or overly fast play.
- Puppy can have free access to other puppies and adults in the household (so long as the puppy is not harassing the adults).
- You may have to enforce rest periods by putting puppy away for naps.





**18 months  
to 2 years**

# Exercise Guidelines For Puppies

[puppyculture.com](http://puppyculture.com)

## Sustained and Continuous Walking

- Hikes and walks can be gradually increased to as long and as rigorous as you and your dog both like, but remember that a dog's soft tissue is still maturing through about three years old. Increases should be gradual and you should back off if your dog appears tired or reluctant.

## Sniff 'N Stroll

- Sniff and strolls can be gradually replaced with more sustained "walks" but remember that sniffing is the primary way dogs relate to the world, so be a sport and continue to give your dog an opportunity to stop and sniff from time to time.

## Noodling and Kibble Trails

- Your dog can go out in a safe yard and explore at his own pace or do a "Kibble Trail" as long as he likes.

## Running

- Running and endurance training can gradually be introduced at this time.

## Jumping and Impact Activities

- Gradually raise jumps and contact obstacles to full competition height between 18-24 months old.
- Stairs are always a hazard and should have good traction - carpet indoors, non-skid surface outdoors.

## Swimming

- Competition swimming behaviors can be introduced and dog can swim for as long as he volunteers to.
- Life jackets are always a must.

## Chasing

- Gauge your play style by your dog's common sense. If you throw a ball and your dog tumbles head over heels to get it, don't throw the ball - roll or lob it.

## Tugging

- You can start to hold the tug toy higher but generally it's best to let the dog tug on the toy rather than you pulling on it.

## Fast Turns

- Full weave pole training and other activities that involve twisting and turning can be introduced.

## Free Play with Other Dogs

- Always be vigilant when your dogs are playing and intervene by throwing handfuls of food down if there's a lot of body slamming or the play just gets too crazy.



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