

# How Long Should It Take To Train My Dog? Realistic Expectations For Every Age & Stage

### Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

### Transcript

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A common question that we get asked here at DogsThat is, "How long should it take to train my dog because my dog seems to be taking a long time," and that's a question I've never addressed and it's got a somewhat complicated answer, but I believe this Shaped by Dog episode should be listened to by everybody, before they consider getting a dog.

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Hi everybody, I'm Susan Garrett. Welcome to Shape by Dog. How long should it take to educate your child? Well, that depends on do you want your child to grow up to be a street panhandler or would you like your child to become a board-certified brain surgeon? Like the education of one will take a lot longer than the other.

So, in today's episode, we're going to talk about what the expectations should be, what they could be, what you might want to train your dog to do, and what you possibly should be training your dog to do. Because all of those things go into the ability to answer that question – how long does it take to train your dog?

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First thing you should know is dogs, like me, are lifelong learners. They are little processing machines. They take in data and process it and spit out information so fast, so many times a day, and they're taking it in by a lot of their senses. Yes, they're learning by seeing, they're learning by listening, they're learning by investigating with their nose. They're investigating with how things feel, how things taste, and all of that data gets processed and it's an ongoing processor.

As long as your puppy or dog is awake, they are learning. Part of that learning might intentionally be happening by you teaching.

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Part of that learning might be by you ignoring them and then [getting reinforcement from external sources](#). So, any reinforcement that goes through you ideally helps create a better bond, a better relationship with you. And if you're studying the use of reinforcement, maybe you're in one of my online classrooms, then you're learning to grow behaviors by the intentional use of the reinforcement.

But if you're like many people who get a dog and they rely on "Hope Dog Training," meaning they just hope the dog turns out to be a good dog, then the educator becomes the environment. And the environment can teach the dogs a lot of amazing things that unfortunately will cause a lot of frustration for you, the pet owner.

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Because those amazing things, include things like [chasing bicycles, children, cars](#), include things like digging. Like remember, they're processing things with all of their senses.

Take for example, you go to work. Now, your dogs will eventually very quickly figure out when you are coming home, and especially if you are on a regular routine. Now, we might say "Oh, they must have like a time clock."



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It could be, it could be that they are processing time, but remember they process on a higher degree than we do a lot of their senses. So possibly they are looking out the window, they see your car, they get to recognize your car. So that's how they know you are about to be home in the next 90 seconds or a minute if they can see down the road.

But what if they can also hear because they have this acute sense of hearing. They have learned to process the sounds of your bad muffler. The way your shocks shake your car. They have learned all of the little nuances of your vehicle. So, before they see the vehicle, they can hear the vehicle. So now their expectation of you coming home happens a little bit earlier.

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Now, what if your dog and their amazing sense of smell has an idea of when you've left the house, there's a density of your scent still in the house. And as that time goes by, rather than the dog having a clock in their head. What if they could tell the density of your scent, that when it gets to this level, that's when you will be home in the next few minutes.

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So that density of your smell causes them to start listening for your car. When they hear the car, it causes them to look out the window. You drive in and go, "Yeah, you must have seen my car coming in the driveway." They're little processing machines, so we need to give them credit because they're sponges, they are constantly learning.

Yet too often people sign up for one dog training class, maybe an eight week class. They take the dog to class, they may or may not do the homework from that class. And then after eight weeks they go, 'Boom. Yep. I trained my dog.' But what happens after that eight weeks? There isn't like a magic vault.

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Remember either you are intentionally feeding that canine processor key information by your most important resource – reinforcement, or the environment is feeding them that information. So, whatever they learned in that eight week dog training class, can be quickly unlearned over the next days, weeks, or months, maybe even less than that.

So, humans have this unrealistic expectation, like, would you take a child to kindergarten, and they've done their first year of half days and go, "Well, that's your education, I'm glad now you've learned all you need to learn to live a happy long life." No. No, you wouldn't. But why is that expectation put on the dog?

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So, now that you know they're lifelong learners, you have to train based on [the stage and the age of the dog](#), let's talk about the stage and the age and what that requires. So, I've broken down a dog's life stages into six categories. You could maybe squish them into five, but let's say six, and let's assume you're getting a puppy but [if you get a rescue dog](#), it's very similar.

The first little while in your home, that puppy or rescue dog, is going to have somewhat of a "honeymoon period." It appears that they're dotting on you, that they love you, that they're really attracted to you. But really, they're seeking the safety level of this new environment, especially if they are a rescue dog.



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But for a puppy that's been taken from the litter they're unsure of what's safe to do. So, what appears like the honeymoon period, which can last anywhere from a couple of weeks to maybe even a full month.

So, if you get a puppy at eight weeks, it might go up to 11 or 12 weeks of age where that puppy seems to do everything you want and they seem to follow you everywhere because you are giving them attention, you're giving them reinforcement, and they still are seeking that psychological safety to know what they can do and what they can't do. That's the honeymoon period. And when you get a rescue dog, it will be the same, but the honeymoon ends. Very quickly.

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Let's call the next stage, "the honeymoon is over or the world is very interesting." And here's where that dog or puppy, if they haven't got a schedule of strategic reinforcement from you where they understand and they have expectations of how their life is going to roll out.

If you've done that. Then things will just keep progressing, remember that lifelong learner, that data processing, little four-legged fluff ball, they're just going to keep sopping up all that good information from you. But if you were fooled by the honeymoon and you go, 'Wow, I got this great little dog and I don't know what people were talking about, that dog loves me.'

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Well, when the honeymoon is over and you don't have strategic learning happening on a regular basis, that's where the environment steps in. Because the psychological safety is now at a higher level and the puppy, or the dog starts to investigate their environment.

They start to find, 'Where can I get reinforcement? Ooh, this shoe, it tastes so yummy. The couch, oh my gosh, feathers come out of the couch! I could dig holes in the backyard!'

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And there's so many other exciting reinforcers out there, because we haven't given that puppy enough intentional learning processes. We haven't set up enrichment, engagement, relationship building, and learning.

And so, the environment is happy to do that for you, and that stage of the world is full of amazing things, will go from when the honeymoon is over from 12 weeks all the way up, up to like 8, 9, 10 months. At some point, all of the misbehavior might drive you cray cray.

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Somewhere between 8 to 10 months and a year and a half is when most puppies end up getting turfed out or most owners go, "I can't deal with this. I need help." And that's when they look to train the dog. But the truth is, puppies are amazing learners the moment you get them home. Don't wait until they become such a frustration to you that you either have to get rid of them, or do something with them.

Training for puppies and dogs, just like people, happens throughout their entire life, heck, you could take your 80-year-old grandmother and teach them how to use a computer with ease, if they were keen to learn and if the reinforcement value was high.



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The chance to do FaceTime with me, grandma. The chance to have access to Susan Garrett's amazing [Shaped by Dog episodes](#)! If the motivation is high, a 90-year-old, a hundred year, a centurion, they can learn a computer and your dogs will never stop learning as long as you make the effort to involve them in your life.

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And once you think you can deal with the “environment is interesting stage” of puppy development, you are now jumping into the 8 to 18 months age of “hormones are raging and life is getting grand.” And please don't bypass this stage by getting an early spay. Do the research and Google [the downside of early spays](#). Yes, be a responsible pet owner and do not let your dog outside to have an unwanted pregnancy or to breed another dog, that's another episode.

I encourage you, be careful with your puppies and dogs, but do not spay or neuter to them young. And so, if we're not going to spay or neuter to them, that means we have this hormonal adolescent, which brings on all kinds of excitement, all kinds of fears, [possibly some reactivity](#), possibly some insecure posturing, some aggression.

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Oh, it's amazing! It doesn't have to be that way, but that often is what's going to happen when the environment is your dog's trainer. And from a year and a half to maybe three to four years old, I'm going to call that a “young adolescent,” where the dog is constantly training and when they get to be a 3-year-old, depending on the breed, that's where you see the true self, the true predictability of the dog.

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You know when you can trust them, you know, when possibly you can't trust them because you've let the environment do too much training. Beyond that, we have “middle age.”

My wish for you that your middle age stage for your dog starts at three years old and goes all the way up to 13 or 14, and then we go to [“the geriatric stage,”](#) which let's hope we get to 20 with every dog we own, right? Maybe beyond!

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So those are the stages. What's the learning that's going to happen? That's going to depend on how you see your dog fitting in your life. So, when I say to first time dog owners, “What do you want to train your dog to do?” The number one thing I. I get told is, “Oh, [potty train.](#)”

Once you've helped that dog to become reliable in the house, and you might get lucky, and if the breeder's done a lot of work to help that puppy have a clean environment, they may learn to potty outside very quickly, possibly within a month or two.

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That's not realistic though, for some puppies it might take six months and maybe even a year. Hopefully beyond six months in a year you're having less than one or two accidents, at all in a month throughout that time. But if you're having more, then you need to get more diligent. And [we have a podcast episode here](#) on Shaped by Dog to help you with that.

That's really what people, like “That's my big goal, I want my, my puppy to learn to not go to the bathroom in the house” but let's think of all the other things that you need to consider.



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What about puppy manners? How is that puppy going to greet an adult? Don't think of them as a cute little 12 week old fluff ball, think of them as 125 pound adult dog. [How do you want that puppy to greet](#) your friends, your family, your 90-year-old grandmother who's just learning the computer? You need to have that goal from the time that they're puppies. How do you want them to react around children? Is it all right for them to [nip hands](#)?

Is it all right to [steal food from the counter](#)? From your lap as you're eating dinner? Is it all right for them to run off with your socks? Is it all right for them to chew items of clothing or...? Manners! It's easy for us to think about things we don't want our dog to do, but dogs can't learn don't, they learn what we do want.

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So, you have to be structured in the learning. And I would say if you are very diligent, between the ages of when that puppy or rescue dog arrives for the first eight months, that's the bulk of the work. But if you're like most people, you put it off until you've got that adolescent that is a pain in your butt that you are so frustrated with.

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And then, the learning happens in the adolescent and the hormonal stages. The learning happens like this. First, we have to unlearn what the environment has taught, and then we have to put in the good learning that we want to replace it. It's a lot easier to take that new puppy or dog when you get them home and set them on that path of intentional learning.

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So, after we've got potty training and manners, there's things like [name recognition](#), [teaching the dog to come when called](#), [how to walk nicely on a loose leash](#), how to bring a toy back. That's what helps with the relationship and the enrichment. All of those things can happen in those first eight months.

And if you do it right in the first eight months, when you get to the hormonal, yes, maybe there'll be some behavioral issues that you might have to work on. No puppy is perfect, no dog is perfect. But if you put in the work for those first eight months and play your way to a very successful relationship and clear expectations so that dog is continuing to learn the good things you want them to learn, then when they get to be hormonal and middle-aged dogs, it's maintenance.

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Now, if you end up like me, somebody who, when I got my first dog and I wanted her to be an amazing pet, and by the time she got to be a year old, I'm like, 'wow, she knows all the things I thought I would want to teach her. What else can we learn together?' And I just got hooked on helping my dog discover new ways to have an amazing life.

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That might happen to you, and so for your dog's entire life, you're going to be bringing them new puzzles that they can solve, that they can learn, that can open up new avenues of investigation. Maybe you'll do some scent work with your dog. Maybe you have a protection dog that you want to do some protection work. Or you might get the agility bug like me, or the competition obedience bug, or the rally bug.





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There's lots of things you can do. But they all start with the same foundation, and that is those eight months of putting in the work to have an amazing family pet, so you have this amazing relationship. But remember, those lifelong learners are always learning. So, the maintenance of the education has to be ongoing, just like any of us continuing education in the field that's your passion is so critical for you to keep your skills sharp.

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So, I hope that gives you a good overview of what responsible pet dog ownership looks like. What the foundation of building a great family pet can lead you to an amazing relationship that you can go on to all different avenues of life with your dog

And how to set realistic expectations so that you are not frustrated, and that puppy is not frustrated, and most importantly, that the environment doesn't become the bigger educator in that puppy's or rescue dog's life. I hope that all makes sense to you, I'll see you next time right here on Shaped by Dog.

### Resources:

[Podcast Episode 197: Outsmarting Distractions: How To Use Environmental Reinforcement in Dog Training](#)

[Podcast Episode 24: Distraction Intensity Index: Help For Dogs Who Chase Chipmunks, Bicycles, And Neighbor's Cats #24](#)

[Podcast Episode 218: Puppy Development Stages And Your Dog's Behavior](#)

[Podcast Episode 255: Rescue Dog Training: Priorities For Your First Week Together](#)

[Shaped by Dog Podcast](#)

[Article: Early Spay/Neuter, Desexing Risks by Dr. Karen Becker](#)

[YouTube Playlist: Reactive or Aggressive Dogs: Key Insights with Susan Garrett](#)

[Podcast Episode 62: 12 Keys to Helping My Dogs Live a Long and Happy Life](#)

[Podcast Episode 48: Potty Train Your Puppy in a Week \(Easy 3 Step Process\)](#)

[Podcast Episode 254: Why Your Older Puppy Or Dog Is Not House Trained And What To Do About It](#)

[Podcast Episode 109: Project Calm Dog: Prevent Over Enthusiastic Greetings](#)

[YouTube Playlist: Puppy Biting Help with Susan Garrett](#)

[Podcast Episode 293: MRI: A Simple 3 Part Dog Training Formula To Fix Problems Like Counter Surfing, Reactivity And More](#)

[YouTube Video: Susan Garrett's 5 Games for Puppies](#)

[Podcast Episode 302: The Recall Myth: Why Your Off Leash Dog Isn't Coming When Called And How To Fix It](#)

[YouTube Playlist: Loose Leash Walking with Susan Garrett](#)



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### About Susan

A world-leading educator of dog trainers, Susan is also one of the most successful agility competitors of the last three decades. She has won multiple Gold Medals at National or World Championship events with every dog she has ever owned over the past 30 years. Susan was one of the very first dog trainers to share knowledge online when she opened her "Clicker Dogs" website many years ago. Susan has helped hundreds of thousands of people enjoy a great relationship with their dogs through her workshops and keynote speaking around the world, award winning books, DVDs, magazine articles, blog posts, podcasts, free dog training and dog agility video series, and online dog training programs.



A natural teacher and an entertaining speaker, Susan is world renowned for her dog training knowledge and practical application of that knowledge. Her understanding of how to apply science-based learning principles to both competitive and family pet dog training has been pivotal in changing how dogs are trained.

Susan is now helping many thousands of dog owners in 82 countries have the best relationship possible with their dogs. The real joy for her comes from bringing confidence to dogs and their owner through playful interactions and relationship building games that are grounded firmly in the science of how animals learn.



### Meet Us Online

Website	<a href="https://dogsthat.com">https://dogsthat.com</a>
Facebook	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/SusanGarrettDogAgility/">https://www.facebook.com/SusanGarrettDogAgility/</a>
Instagram	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/SusanGarrettDogsThat/">https://www.instagram.com/SusanGarrettDogsThat/</a>
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