



## DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES IN TMs

Tibetan Mastiffs are still a primitive breed. Bitches normally come into season once a year, in the fall or early winter, with pups born in the winter or early spring. This is the time of year when this year's puppies are settling into their new homes and last year's puppies are starting to transition from puppy to adulthood. It's a good time to review developmental stages and how each plays out with a TM. Since most people don't get their puppies until they are 8+ weeks old, let's start there.

In the 2-4 month time frame, puppies are weaned and start to separate from their mother and littermates. It is also the human imprint stage, where they begin to bond with their owners. Spending time with your puppy, lots of time, is imperative and will affect his ability to relate to people for the rest of his life. With human bonding comes social awareness: Who is a member of the family and who is not. Socialization at this stage is important for a TM to learn to be comfortable with those outside their family unit. Vets discourage taking puppies out to public areas before they are fully vaccinated, but that does not mean you can't socialize your puppy. Invite friends and relatives into your home. Ask them to bring their pets. The mistake many people make is failing to socialize at home, where TMs are most protective, but take sensible precautions when introducing visitors. Do not allow your pup to rush the door or bark uncontrollably when the doorbell rings. Have a leash handy or crate your puppy until your visitor is safely inside, and then introduce slowly and calmly, allowing the pup to approach the visitor and not the other way around. A Tibetan Mastiff is more open to new experiences if he feels he is in control of the situation, so let him make the initial approach, in his time. If you notice your pup becoming stressed, you may need to remove him from loud or chaotic situations, and provide downtime. Socialization should take into consideration a pup's ability to cope and not overwhelm.

By 4-8 months, your pup is ready to explore the outside world. A puppy's mental capacity is fully formed by this age and this is the period when they learn the quickest and easiest. Much of what they learn is from experience by trial and error, so introducing new experiences daily is essential. TMs quickly lay claim to places they frequent, ever expanding "their" territory, so vary the route for walks, go to new parks, introduce new people, etc. Some owners are reluctant to engage in activities that their pup does not like, such as crate training or riding in a car. If the puppy is uncomfortable, drools or urinates, the owner avoids it. Better to address and work through the situation as a puppy than try to wrestle a 120 lb. TM into a crate or a car at some point down the road. Whatever you want your TM to do as an adult, do it as a puppy and do it often. Stimulation during this phase will actually increase brain cells in the appropriate area of the brain.

Your TM will develop emotional reactions to experiences, which will help determine temperament into adulthood. If a TM has a bad experience at this age, he never forgets it. Whenever possible, take the time to introduce your pup to a person or object that elicits a negative or fearful response. I remember spending a half hour to let a pup come to terms with a burned out tree stump we encountered on a walk. At first sight, the pup was terrified and wanted to run away. We sat down, watched that old stump and waited for the pup to get up and venture a bit closer. We repeated this until we were able to get close enough to discover that this wasn't something to fear after all. Think ahead and strategize to avoid potential problems before they occur. It is your job to guard your pup fiercely until he is ready to guard you.

The period from 8-18 months is a complex one. Pups reach adult height and it is easy to forget that they are not yet mature. Owners often expect their puppies to act like adults, when in fact they are likely to behave like typical teenagers: Questioning everything and pushing the limits. This is also the time your puppy will start to sexually mature, and females will have their first heat season. With these hormonal changes come behavioral changes as well. Females may become needy and clingy as they approach estrus, and sometimes same sex aggressive. Determined males will break teeth or break glass to get to a female in season. You will discover just how smart and how strong these dogs are.

Be prepared. Look at your situation critically and think of every possible escape route and scenario, because your TM will do exactly that. You have to be one step ahead.

Even if your dog is altered, this period presents challenges. TMs chew; they dig; they destroy. They have all this energy that needs an outlet. They are not necessarily more destructive than other breeds, but they are bigger and have bigger teeth than most, so when they go at something, it is destroyed thoroughly and rapidly. In addition, their guardian instincts emerge, and TMs realize they need to guard against something...they are just not sure what. So they bark at everything. If a TM is left outside to bark on his own, he will bark without ceasing. Teach him discretion by being a partner in protection. Let him know you have the situation in hand. This is the time when TMs also start to become rigidly territorial, and will challenge a stranger that comes into "their" home or yard, or approaches "their" child or car. It is your job to let them know what a real threat is and what is not; when it is appropriate to bark and when it is not. Tibetan Mastiffs respect a strong leader and will expect that from you. TMs like to be in control and what is often labeled a "fear" is actually a situation where the pup feels a lack of control and is confused as to how to respond. Portray the sense that your pup can relax because you are in control. Establish a routine; TMs thrive on routine. Work through threat assessments. Set rules and stick to them. Don't take "No" for an answer: Keep working with your pup until you get the response you are looking for.

TMs enter their young adulthood phase from 18-30 months. You may see a sudden change in temperament and aggressive issues may arise. Dogs that have gotten along in the past may have to be separated. Your pup will become more independent and less eager to please. There may also be a challenge for pack position if there is more than one dog in the household. Resource guarding may surface. This is the age when many TMs are returned to the breeder, surrendered to a rescue, or dumped at a shelter. Traditional dominance training will not work with a TM but leadership and partnership does. Sometimes it takes creative thinking to negotiate with a TM and gain his cooperation. For example, I have a male that became food aggressive about this age. We have worked out a solution: If he starts to guard his food, I offer him a highly valued treat and trade him for his food bowl. The trick is not to demand obedience but to make your TM think it is in his best interest to do as you ask.

By the time your TM is 2 ½ to 3 years, if you have invested the time to train and socialize your pup with patience and consistency, his behavior should be fairly consistent and predictable, and at this point you will have an amazing companion and home and property guardian. Enjoy!

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Noble Legacy Tibetan Mastiffs