

8 Ways Your Dog's Personality Can Change Over Time

Human personalities can change as people go through life, so why would dogs be any different? According to this survey of owners of over 1,600 dogs, dogs' personalities can evolve to a surprisingly large degree. Know which dogs are more - and less - likely to experience these eight changes.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- A 2019 large-scale study of dog parents suggests that like humans, dogs' personalities change — often significantly — as they grow older
- One of the most important findings of the study was that dogs' responsiveness to training increases steadily from puppyhood, peaks at six to eight years, and then begins a gradual decline during which it's still possible to "teach an old dog new tricks"
- Another finding is that attendance at obedience classes is associated with more positive personality traits throughout a dog's life
- Dog guardians should be aware of and prepare for not only the physical changes that come with aging, but also potential behavioral changes

Scientific research into the relationship between dogs and their humans has really picked up speed in recent years. One example is a fascinating 2019 study from Michigan State University showing that the personalities of family dogs change over time, and our interactions with them play a role in these gradual changes.

"When humans go through big changes in life, their personality traits can change. We found that this also happens with dogs — and to a surprisingly large degree," William Chopik, professor of psychology and lead study author, explained in an MSU news release.

"We expected the dogs' personalities to be fairly stable because they don't have the wild lifestyle changes humans do, but they actually change a lot. We uncovered similarities to their owners, the optimal time for training and even a time in their lives that they can get more aggressive toward other animals."¹

Researchers Surveyed the Owners of Over 1,600 Dogs

The study, published in the *Journal of Research in Personality*, is among the first and largest to date to evaluate changes in dogs' personalities.² The researchers developed an extensive survey of questions about dogs' personalities and behavioral history.

The survey was answered by owners of over 1,600 dogs across 50 different breeds, ranging in age from a few weeks to 15 years, including a similar number of males and females.

The survey questions incorporated five aspects of the canine personality: fearfulness, aggression toward people, aggression toward animals, activity or excitability, and responsiveness to training. The owners also answered a survey about their own personalities.

Obedience Classes Reduce Fear and Anxiety

The researchers discovered, predictably, that younger dogs are more active and excitable than older dogs, and the decrease in activity level occurs gradually and steadily over the course of a dog's lifetime.

The trait of aggression toward both people and other animals peaks in six to eight-year-old dogs, with both younger and older dogs showing lower levels of aggression of either type.

When it comes to responsiveness to training, the researchers found the trait increases steadily from puppyhood and peaks between the ages of six and eight, at which time it begins a gradual decline. However, the decline occurs no more rapidly than the rise from puppyhood to middle age, suggesting that it is indeed possible to "teach an old dog new tricks."

One personality trait that rarely changes as a dog ages, according to the researchers, is fear and anxiety. However, they also report that dogs exposed to obedience classes tend to be less fearful overall.

"Exposure to obedience classes was associated with more positive personality traits across the dog's lifespan," said Chopik. "This gives us exciting opportunities to examine why personality changes in all sorts of animals."

Do Positive People Have Happier Dogs?

Since the MSU study measured dog personality traits that aren't shared by humans, the researchers' observations of how "dogs resemble their owners" is, in my opinion, not especially helpful. From the MSU news release:

"Extroverted humans rated their dogs as more excitable and active, while owners high in negative emotions rated their dogs as more fearful, active and less responsive to training. Owners who rated themselves as agreeable rated their dogs as less fearful and less aggressive to people and animals."

"The owners who felt happiest about their relationships with their dogs reported active and excitable dogs, as well as dogs who were most responsive to training. Aggression and anxiety didn't matter as much in having a happy relationship," Chopik said.

As dog behavior expert and author Dr. Stanley Coren points out in his Canine Corner blog in Psychology Today, dogs and humans share at least four personality traits (agreeableness, extraversion, openness, and neuroticism),³ and hopefully, future researchers will look at those traits in dogs to see if they change with age, as they do in humans.

Alexandra Horowitz's new book *The Year of the Puppy, How Dogs Become Themselves*, is a wonderful read summarizing the science behind the first year of a dog's mental and emotional development, including the behavior changes that can go along with it.

8 Ways Your Dog's Behavior May Change With Age

Most pet parents realize their dogs will change physically as they get older, but many aren't prepared for the behavior changes that can also accompany aging.

It goes without saying that any change in your pet's normal behavior should be discussed with your veterinarian, because animals often express underlying physical problems through a behavior change. For example, a painful hip or back can result in one or more of the behaviors listed below.

1. **Anxiety** — Dogs who are anxiety-prone as youngsters and adults (for example, those with noise phobias or separation anxiety) often become more so as they age.

Positive reinforcement training may be helpful in curbing anxiety-related behavior in your dog, and it certainly can't hurt as long as you don't get too focused on results. It's important to realize that just as you've dealt with some level of anxiety in your pet for years, you should expect and plan for amplification of those issues as she ages.

Again, fun through playtime and exercise, along with social classes are great ways to help manage anxiety-based behaviors and build trust.

2. **Hypersensitivity, fears, and phobias** — If your senior pet has deteriorating vision or hearing, even his own home can become a frightening place. Pets thrive on routine and consistency, and this goes double for aging companions who are having trouble navigating even familiar terrain.

It's important at this stage of your dog's life to keep his environment consistent. Don't arbitrarily move his food or water bowl, his crate, his bed, or his toys. Try to avoid rearranging the furniture in your home. Mealtimes and potty walks should be consistent from one day to the next, as well as exercise and play time.

If your dog is becoming more sensitive to normal household or neighborhood sounds, play background music or keep the TV on to mask noises.

3. **Aggression** — Along with an age-related reduction in hearing, eyesight and sense of smell, your dog may startle more easily, and in some dogs, this can result in unprovoked aggression. The situation will require some sleuthing on your part, with the help of your veterinarian, to understand the specific causes or triggers of the behavior so a treatment or behavior modification protocol can be implemented.

Enrolling in positive training classes (obedience, nose work, agility, etc) through the 8-year mark when aggressive behavior potentially peaks is a great way to help keep a dog's interactions with other humans and animals controlled, positive and relationship-oriented.

Significant behavior changes may also require the help of a veterinary behaviorist, and I encourage you to contact one sooner rather than later if your older dog is having episodes of unprovoked aggressive behavior.

4. **Compulsive behavior** — These are repetitive behaviors your dog may perform over and over, for no apparent reason. They can include constant licking (usually of a particular body part like a paw), which can result in hot spots. Other behaviors include repetitive tail chasing, spinning, jumping, pacing, "air biting," and staring blankly into space.

If a thorough workup by your veterinarian shows no medical cause for your dog's obsessive behavior, she may

be doing it to relieve feelings of anxiety or conflict. One way to try to break the cycle is to simply stop her as soon as she begins the behavior, by speaking calmly to her and petting or massaging her.

If the behavior is potentially dangerous or harmful and you don't feel you can manage it on your own, talk with your integrative veterinarian or a **veterinary behaviorist**.

5. **Destructiveness** — Sadly, some dogs become destructive as they age — a situation that can be quite disturbing for family members. You might lose a cherished belonging or two at this stage of your pet's life, or he might turn his destructive urges on himself.

Some older dogs develop pica (eating non-food objects) for the first time. Others seem driven to lick, suck or chew their own body parts, those of family members, or household objects. Digging and scratching can also become a problem. Many of these behaviors can be boredom-based, so maintaining daily environmental enrichment is crucial.

Once again, it's important to talk with your veterinarian about any destructive tendencies your dog develops to rule out an underlying physical cause. Meanwhile, you'll want to dog-proof your home and belongings, and ensure your pet has plenty of appropriate raw bones and chews to gnaw on, but only when you're around to supervise.

6. **Vocalizing** — Excessive vocalizing is more common in older cats than dogs, but if your dog is growing more "talkative," it can be unsettling because as her guardian, you want desperately to understand what she needs from you.

An increase in vocalizing can be caused by the disorientation that comes with a decline in cognitive function. It can also mean your dog isn't hearing things as well as she once did, or that she's in pain.

If your veterinarian has ruled out an underlying medical condition, try training your dog to respond to a gentle verbal cue such as "Quiet" or "Shhh", and reward her lavishly for her efforts. However, keep in mind it's possible she doesn't realize she's making noise, in which case she's not likely to learn a verbal command to be quiet. If that's the case, you'll just need to distract her when she vocalizes by speaking quietly and reassuringly to her.

7. **Inappropriate elimination** — If your older dog seems to have forgotten his housetraining, there are a number of potential causes, none of which involve deliberate disobedience. The first order of business is to make an appointment with your veterinarian to rule out any underlying disease process.

Once that's done, you'll need to investigate other possible causes for inappropriate elimination, including decreased mobility, needing to go more often, or less control over his bladder or bowels.

Initial steps you can take to resolve the problem include taking him outside more often to eliminate, and/or introducing/re-introducing him to a crate. It's also important to recognize the difference between urine dribbling, over which your dog has no control no matter how often he goes outside, and urinating.

8. **Nighttime restlessness** — Some older dogs develop a problem sleeping through the night. Age-related issues that can cause this change include loss of vision or hearing that affects sleep quality, the need to relieve herself more often, or an increased response to noises that never bothered her before.

All dogs, including senior and geriatric pets, need age- and condition-appropriate exercise each day. If your dog gets some exercise already, try increasing the time she spends playing or taking walks. If she doesn't get

much exercise, start safely increasing her daily activity level. The goal is to tire her out physically, so she'll be more likely to sleep at night.

If your dog needs midnight trips outside to relieve herself but is otherwise healthy (as confirmed by your vet), she may be taking in too much water before bed. Try removing her water bowl after dinner, and ensure she gets an opportunity to relieve herself right before you retire for the night.

Let your dog sleep in your bedroom. Sleeping near her humans should help ease any anxiety that is contributing to her nighttime restlessness.

Sources and References

[Bark November 2021](#)

¹ [MSU Today, February 21, 2019](#)

² [Journal of Research in Personality Volume 79, April 2019, Pages 94-108](#)

³ [Psychology Today, February 20, 2019](#)
