DOG PLUS ME · THE PLAYBOOK SERIES · NO. 01

The New Puppy Playbook

The week-by-week plan for your puppy's first 8 weeks home: easier days, safe socialization, a vet-ready puppy, and help for you, too. For puppies about 8–16 weeks old.

Reward-based | The Daily Loop | 14 real-life situations | 10 printables



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START HERE · 2 MINUTES

You don't need to read this whole guide tonight.

You need the parts that match your puppy and your week. Find yourself below and follow that path. Everything else is there when you need it.

IF THIS IS YOU…	READ THIS, IN THIS ORDER
Your puppy comes home today	Ch. 1. That's enough for today. Tomorrow, the Daily Loop (Ch. 2), then Week 1 (Ch. 4).
Your puppy isn't home yet	Ch. 3, the setup weekend. Then Ch. 1 the day they arrive.
Up all night	Situation 1 → the night summary in Ch. 1 → the Crate Fix (Ch. 6) for the full night plan.
Can we go out yet?	Situation 3 → the safe outings menu in Ch. 6 and Printable 4. Your vet sets the walk date.
Have I missed the window?	Situation 5. Short answer: no. The early weeks matter most, so start now. But it never stops mattering.
I'm not coping	Situation 14 and the "You" strip in Ch. 4. Read "You're not a bad dog owner", at the front of this guide, tonight too. Low mood that's severe? Talk to your doctor today.
Came home at 10–12 weeks	The start-point table in Ch. 9 tells you which week to start on. Read Ch. 1 and Ch. 2 first either way.

How this guide is different

- **It's week by week.** What to do this week, at this age, and why. Not a gear list or a blank log.
- **It looks after you, too.** Every week has a "You" strip, because nobody does puppy alone.
- **It settles "vaccines or socialization?"** Safe outings now, from a menu. Quality, not quotas. Your vet sets the walk date.
- **It's kind.** No shouting, squirt bottles, pinning, nose-rubbing, "cry it out" or "pack leader" rules.

WHERE THIS COMES FROM

Every recommendation is based on published guidance from veterinary schools and hospitals, veterinary associations, welfare charities and peer-reviewed research, in plain steps. Where sources disagree, we take the safer, welfare-first position. Where a rule is our own, we say so. Sources are listed at the back. This guide is educational and doesn't replace your vet.

HONEST EXPECTATIONS

What's normal: honest timelines

You'll see guides promising a "perfect puppy" in a week. We won't. Socialization is never "done", and no reliable source gives an end date for the hard part. Here's what the sources do say.

WEEK HOME (AGE)	WHAT'S HAPPENING	WHAT'S NORMAL
Week 1 (8–9 wk)	A new home, no littermates. The first vet visit, within a week	Night waking and crying, mostly in the first week. Lots of sleep. Wary of new things
Week 2 (9–10 wk)	Settling in. Many schedules give a second vaccine dose around now (your vet sets the plan)	Following you everywhere. Mouthing and biting: it's normal play
Weeks 3–4 (10–12 wk)	Confidence growing	The evening "witching hour". Many puppies still need 1–2 night breaks. Daytime alone time: about 2 hours at most
Weeks 5–6 (12–14 wk)	Baby teeth start falling out at about 12 weeks. Meals may move from 4 to 3 (ask your vet)	More testing of limits. Mouthing may be at its peak. The sensitive period is closing for many puppies, so keep up gentle exposure
Weeks 7–8 (14–16 wk)	Under WSAVA and AAHA, the final puppy vaccine is at 16 weeks or older. UK schedules can differ (your vet sets the plan)	First public walks, once your vet says so. Some puppies start sleeping through. Socialization carries on past 16 weeks
You, weeks 1–3	Frustration, anxiety and weariness	Common. They fade for most owners

Every puppy is different. These are typical patterns from several sources, not milestones. Ages assume your puppy came home at 8 weeks (older? see Ch. 9).

The big three, honestly. Potty: some puppies are reliable on a schedule in 1–2 weeks, but full house-training typically takes 4–6 months (the Potty Fix). Nights: most puppies sleep through at about 16–20 weeks (the Crate Fix). Biting: many puppies get much less mouthy around 4–6 months (the Puppy Biting Fix).

> OUR HONEST ANSWER TO "WHEN DOES IT GET EASIER?"
>
> Week 1 is the hard part. Most people feel better within weeks; some puppies take longer. No source gives a number of weeks, so we won't invent one.

Our standard: "8-week ready"

"8-week ready" is our own standard, not a vet or charity one. It's not "perfect". Your puppy is 8-week ready when:

- [ ] they follow the Daily Loop on most days
- [ ] they've passed the 3 Cans Test in at least one new place every week
- [ ] they take Treat–Touch–Treat on every body part at the "hold 3 s" step
- [ ] they relax through a short Gate Game absence with you out
- [ ] and you get your daily off-duty break

Three things that will happen (and are normal)

1. **The first week is the hardest.** Broken nights, puddles, and "what have we done?" Normal, and temporary for most.
2. **A great few days, then a bad one.** Not failure. Back to the Daily Loop.
3. **A startle spell.** Many puppies go through spells of being more easily startled, and the timing varies a lot. Don't panic, don't force it. Make the world easier for a few days and keep it pleasant (Ch. 7).

READ THIS IF YOU FEEL GUILTY

You're not a bad dog owner.

Maybe you've cried in the shower. Maybe you've wondered if this was "the biggest mistake of my life". Owners say they feel "totally trapped", "a prisoner in my own home", and then guilty for feeling it.

Here's the line owners write most often: "I feel like a bad dog owner for having these feelings!" You're not. Here's why.

The puppy blues are real, and common

One study of 1,801 owners found three common feelings: frustration, anxiety and weariness. Owners scored lower once puppyhood had passed. The owners were in Finland and mostly women, so it's one group, not everyone. Its university said "just under half" of owners reported significant negative experiences.

So if you feel it, you're in very good company. And it's mostly the exhaustion talking. As one owner put it, "EVERYTHING feels so much worse when you're exhausted."

You don't need to be the "pack leader"

Many people say you have to be the boss and eat first. Here's what we actually know. Vets at VCA say a puppy "is not trying to dominate you," and the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior (AVSAB) advises avoiding trainers who use these ideas. Our house rules are for safety and consistency, not status.

How to start again

1. **Shrink the day.** Just the Daily Loop (Ch. 2). Nothing else is required today.
2. **Get some sleep.** Swap the night shift with another adult, or nap when your puppy naps.
3. **Share the load.** Fill in the Tag-Out Rota (Ch. 3, Printable 8). Every adult gets a daily 30-minute off-duty break (our own rule).
4. **Write down one win a day.** Printable 10 has the space.

IF IT'S MORE THAN TIRED

If your low mood is severe, lasts more than a couple of weeks, or includes thoughts of harming yourself, talk to your doctor today. If you're in crisis, call a crisis line now.

US: 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline (call or text 988) · UK: Samaritans, 116 123 (free, 24/7)

THE ONE THING TO REMEMBER

It's OK to need a break. Put your puppy in the pen with a chew and have a cup of tea. That's not giving up. It's a calm rest for both of you. You're reading this page, so you're already doing better than you think.

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