

DOGS AND EXERCISE

by

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Gaewinds Golden Retrievers

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In raising a canine from a puppy to an adult dog consideration should be given to the anatomical developmental period. There is awareness and thought given to the emotional and psychological periods of canine development. Consideration of the anatomical aspects of a growing puppy are equally important and merit conscientious attention.

It is a widely believed that a tired puppy is a good puppy! While a tired puppy may be good for the owner, it is not always good for the puppy. Allowing either a pup or adult to reach the point of being tired due to excess exercise can have detrimental affects on their anatomy causing injury, particularly to a growing puppy . Occasionally a pup or adult dog may react just the opposite to excessive exercise than what is expected. (A correlation might be a runner's high.) Dogs can become hyperactive and unmanageable! The concept that puppies need to be given a lot of exercise does not take into consideration the dangers of undue physical stress on immature joints, muscles, ligaments and tendons.

Many joint disorders of the canine, such as hip and elbow dysplasia have a genetic component and are termed polygenic. But, some disorders are latent with what is called a genetic predisposition - meaning that the potential is there but with careful management of the critical growth period the disease may not develop . Dogs are genetically predisposed to osteochondrosis, but environmental factors may influence how this disease is manifested. Some disorders, regardless of the animal's physical management, will be overtly manifested. In large breed dogs the typical age at which the bones' growth plates have closed is 14 months; they close in small breeds are 10 months. The growth plates are the locations in each bone where new bone forms. Damage to the growth plates can result in serious limb abnormalities. How a pup is physically managed through this early growth stage will, in many instances, have an affect on whether or not these disorders actually develop.

World renown expert on canine fitness, Chris Zink, VMD, PhD states in her book

Peak Performance: Coaching the Canine Athlete: "Puppies have an increased risk of injury due to their relative lack of coordination, because their bones are immature and softer than those of adult dogs, and because their muscles are not yet fully developed..... Even after a year of age, young dogs should not be worked strenuously until their muscles have been developed by a program of increasing exercise of a period of several months." She also recommends that there be no forced exercise before six months. In other words, pups can run and play but not be taken on long walks and hikes. Dogs between six and fourteen months can safely do strength training exercise but not endurance.

Strength training exercise is appropriate for an immature puppy body. (Weight lifting is the classical strength exercise for a human.) When a dog does strength training, it is his body that is the weight he moves. Exercises where he moves over short distances are strength training exercises. Therefore, a pup gains strength by moving his own body weight at his own speed. He seeks his own level of exercise. Pups benefit from strength training activities such as fetching, swimming short distances, playing with other pups, chasing games and most other activities a pup normally does. For those who must take their pups for walks, the European dog community has what I consider to be an excellent rule of thumb for young puppies - five minutes of normal walking for each month a pup is old. So, a two month old pup could be walked for ten minutes. This will gradually and safely contribute to age appropriate endurance.

Endurance exercises are those in which a dog makes repetitive movements over a period of time. Long controlled walks, jogging with an owner or running next to a bicycle are endurance exercises. It is important to note that dogs should not be exercised on hard surfaces such as concrete and asphalt. Humans have special shoes designed to absorb the impact of their weight when exercising on hard surfaces, canines do not! Running and hard playing on sand often contributes to injury of the cruciate ligaments. Encouraging serious endurance exercise is not in the anatomical best interests of a dog under 14 months of age.

Canine of all ages benefit from exercise. It is the amount and kind of exercise given at the appropriate age level of anatomical development which is of significance in maintaining a healthy, physically fit and sound dog. It is helpful to compare a growing pup to a child. A six month old pup is commensurate in age to a seven year old human. Would you ask that child to run a 10K race or lift weights? Common sense must guide you!