

## Behavioural factors in choosing a puppy.

There have been many books published on the different breeds with regard to the physical characteristics, which are controlled by the adherence to the breed standard, but the behavioural characteristics of breeds have been generally left to anecdotal evidence. The behavioural characteristics of breeds are a complex interaction between genetic variation and social environment experienced by *individual dogs*. However, the heritability of breed characteristics has been known for several decades.

Research at Southampton University of the 49 most popular breeds of dogs in the UK led to the following table. Watchdog behaviour (W dog trait) included the factors Territorial Defence, dominance over owner, inter dog aggression; reactivity was associated with excessive barking, excitability, and demand for attention; immaturity included playfulness, destructiveness and general activity.

High W dog traits, average reactivity, low immaturity	Rottweiler, German shepherd, Doberman, bull terrier
High W dog traits, average reactivity, high immaturity	Jack Russell, corgi, cocker spaniel, West Highland terrier, Cairn terrier, fox terrier, border collie
Average W dog traits, low reactivity, low immaturity	British bulldog, chow, Great Dane, Airedale
Average W dog traits, <b>high reactivity, low immaturity</b>	Toy poodle, Yorkshire terrier, Chihuahua, miniature poodle, papillon, miniature dachshund, pekingese, lhasa apso, pomeranian, shih tzu, standard dachshund
Low W dog trait, average reactivity, high immaturity	English setter Irish setter, English springer spaniel Dalmatian, Labrador, boxer
Low W dog traits, low reactivity, low immaturity	Greyhound, basset hound, whippet, English pointer
Low W dog traits, high reactivity, low immaturity	King Charles spaniel, cavalier King Charles spaniel, Shetland sheepdog
Average W dog traits, average reactivity, average immaturity	Samoyed, standard poodle, rough collie, old English sheepdog, Miniature schnauzer, Border terrier, beagle, Staffordshire bull terrier, Scottish terrier

' Within each group, the breeds are listed in order of similarity to that set of characteristics. The last one or two breeds listed in each group are its least typical and tend towards inclusion in last group (average on all traits)

Snapping at children was found to be a factor covered by watchdog behaviour and reactivity combined

Reference to the table allows comparisons to be made between the breeds and their suitability for particular households e.g. a breed with a combination of average and high scores for reactivity and immaturity may be an excellent companion but would be prone to distress or destructive behaviour if left alone for any length of time. A careful reading of the table will help to identify a range of breeds with the same behavioural characteristics, which with the physical and maintenance requirements will help prospective owners make the right choice.

### Sex differences.

The same research also found differences between the sexes. Females were found to be more easily trained in obedience, in house training, but were more demanding of affection than males. Males were found to be generally more active, excitable, prone to excessive barking, owner dominance and inter dog aggression.

## **Choosing the individual puppy**

Having decided on a particular breed the prospective owner needs to find a responsible breeder. It is important that the environment in which the pup has lived is seen so that you can observe the puppy's behaviour.

The whole litter should appear content and confident. Puppies that have grown up with nervous or aggressive adults may learn to be aggressive or nervous themselves. The age at which you intend to take the pup is also important; one of the critical periods in the dog's life occurs between six and 12 weeks of age when the pup begins to explore its environment and to set its level of acceptance of what constitutes "normal" stimuli. Thus a puppy from a house with boisterous children will have been exposed to more sensory stimulation than one from a kennel type environment. Obtaining the puppy at six to eight weeks will give you the maximum length of time in which to socialise and habituate your dog.

### **The role of the breeder.**

A responsible breeder as well as presenting you with a healthy animal should also be able to advise you in your choice of pup and its suitability to your particular circumstances. There are many "puppy aptitude tests" which can be administered between six and seven weeks of age which allow a breeder to investigate the various categories of temperament: social attraction, independence and dominance / submissiveness. *However, retesting the same pups several weeks later has shown that the results are not necessarily similar for the same animals.*

With a little commonsense the breeder can use the results to better assess the type of household or owner suitable for each pup. The better the match between dog and owner, then fewer are the problems, and this is reflected in the ensuing reputation of the breeder for producing "good" dogs. Such tests take approximately 15 minutes to run through for each pup and require the tester to be unknown to the animals.

Breeders should also try to expose their puppies to as many environmental stimuli so that they can have a regular experience of TV sets, vacuum cleaners etc. Young pups should meet a variety of people on a regular basis. This is especially important for breeders running on animals in order to later choose their show puppy. Where the primary care provider is a woman it is important that puppies are in regular contact with men to prevent later fear of male judges and vice versa.

### **The owners role.**

The prospective owners can perform a simplified form of the puppy aptitude tests. Clapping hands or the dropping of keys and whether the litter moves away from or towards the sound should indicate the level of habituation. You should not expect to see no reaction but a mild response followed by a quick recovery from the surprise is the ideal. The litter's response to strangers (i.e. you) and how happy they are to be handled and examined will help to show you how well socialised and they are and what extra habituation and socialisation is required.

Helping the puppy to settle into your home more easily can be achieved by letting your puppy familiarise itself to its new family. You can provide your scent on cloths or toys by leaving them in the washing basket with your worn clothes and giving them to the breeder prior to collecting the puppy and bringing it home.

Once home you can begin to habituate your puppy to the various stimuli in its new environment, making sure to include a variety of people (men, women differing ages, babies children etc.) and external stimuli such as traffic and other animals. Obviously this has to be done in such a way that the health of the dog is not compromised, but by holding the puppy in your arms or for larger breeds parking the car in a well frequented spot such as a shopping centre allows the young pup to experience a wider variety of stimuli during the critical weeks of its behavioural development.

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