

Breeders

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In a position paper prepared by Dr. Ralph C. Richardson, DVM which appeared in the September 25, 2006, Manhattan Mercury in response to articles regarding breed bans we find the following information:

Breed bans assume all dogs of a specific breed are likely to bite, instead of acknowledging that most dogs are not a problem. In the 1970's the German Shepherd breed was the one to avoid, in the '80's it was the Doberman, in the '90's it was the Rottweiler, and in the first decade of the 21st Century, it is the Pit Bull. Kansas City has had a breed ban on Pit Bulls for over 15 years, yet they have not controlled their dangerous dog problems through confiscation and euthanasia. Breed ban laws rarely assign appropriate responsibilities where the blame lies: to owners

On www.goodpooch.com I found the following from an article written by reporter Clay Evans that appeared in the Daily Camera:

"According to statistics kept by city of Boulder Animal Care and Control, "labs" — as they are so innocently called — were responsible for an astonishing 18.9 percent of the 748 dog bites in the city from 1997 to 2003, more than twice as many as the next highest breed (German shepherds, at 8.5 percent)."

The breeds mentioned in Dr. Richardson's article probably do not surprise many however, I am sure that the statistic regarding the Labrador retriever is in complete contrast to your impression of the breed. As a breeder of Labrador retrievers myself, however, I find this statistic anything but astonishing.

Dr. Richardson assigns responsibility for the number of dog bites pertaining to the breeds referenced in his article to the owner. However, he fails to assign blame to another responsible party, the breeder. In the same position paper written by Dr. Richardson we read the following:

The AVMA notes that a dog's tendency to bite depends on at least six interacting factors: heredity, early experience, socialization and training, physical and behavioral health, victim behavior, and environment.

Let's look at these factors one by one.

- Heredity – In their classic tome *Genetics and the Social Behavior of the Dog* (University of Chicago Press, 1965) authors John Paul Scott and John L. Fuller reveal that heredity plays an important role in the development of every trait a dog possesses. Owners cannot control the genetic makeup of the dog they purchase. That is the responsibility of the breeder.
- Early experience – on his website www.breedingbetterdogs.com Dr. Carmen Battaglia talks about the benefits of Early Neurological Stimulation (ENS), simple exercises that can be done to reduce the reactivity of a pup to novel sights and sounds when they are mature. In addition, the primary socialization period begins at four weeks of age. Although the topic is up for debate, pups should remain with their dams until at least seven weeks of age.
- Socialization and training – The primary socialization period takes place, depending on who you talk to, between 4 and 16 weeks. Many breeders will allow their pups to go to their new homes at eight weeks of age. More responsible breeders determine the knowledge level of the new owner and arrange the puppy release date accordingly. Both owner and breeder are equally responsible for this factor
- Physical and behavioral health – these factors are the result of genetic makeup and environment combined with proper veterinary care. A responsible breeder asks pointed questions to ascertain what type of owner the prospective purchaser will be. A breeder that asks the right questions will ultimately place their pups with caring, responsible owners.
- Victim Behavior – It is difficult to assign this factor to either the owner or the breeder. Although if the victim is a family member the owner should have educated the person on how to properly interact with the dog.
- Environment - This factor is clearly the responsibility of the owner. An environment in which a dog is continually stressed out or devoid of social contact is certainly more likely to exhibit aggression. The environment in which the dog lives should have been a topic of discussion prior to the breeder agreeing to place the puppy with this owner. Ultimately however the breeder cannot control the environment once the pup has been placed.

I agree with Dr. Richardson that canine aggression is ultimately the responsibility of the owner. After all it is the owner who makes the decision to acquire the dog and therefore must insure that it is safe to be around. However, breeders, especially the irresponsible ones must share some of the blame.

Reputable breeders ask the important questions of would be owners. They do this because they do not want one of their pups ending up in a shelter or having the breed get a tarnished reputation due to the poor handling of an owner. In fact, reputable breeders understand they have an obligation to take back any pup that does not work out with the family that acquires it.

Conversely, puppy mills and back yard breeders produce puppies for the wrong reasons. The result in almost every instance is a litter of pups whose genetic composition is uncertain and do not receive the appropriate social stimulation during the critical period of their life. Since both of these factors are considered by the AVMA to be among those that influence a dog's proclivity to bite it is the responsibility of the breeder to ensure that they know the pedigrees they are combining as well as being certain to ensure early neurological stimulation and a well devised socialization program before they go to their new homes.

We can classify breeders into three broad categories, reputable, backyard and commercial or puppy mill. Although the explanations that I offer below represent my personal opinion, my opinion has been formed as the result of many years listening to and reading the viewpoints of others educated on the issues.

- Reputable Breeder – A reputable breeder is someone that knows the breed standard and makes a concerted effort to produce pups that measure up to that standard as closely as possible. They offer information about the physical characteristics, temperament and intelligence the breed possesses. They will also be able to tell you why they decided to breed the particular bitch that has had the pups to the sire that was chosen.

Such breeders will also know the lineage of their dogs very well. It is their understanding of the pedigree that forms the foundation of a properly planned breeding.

Reputable breeders also follow a proven process of early neurological stimulation. In addition when the pups reach four weeks of age they will implement a well laid out socialization program. Rather than allowing adoptive families to come in and pick out any pup, the reputable breeder evaluates each individual's personality and matches it to the best adoptive family. They can do this because they ask the right questions of prospective owners to determine if the breed is a fit and if so which pup will serve them best.

Profit is the least of concerns to reputable breeders. While the process of producing a pup with good physical characteristics, temperament and intelligence (relative to what the breed standard dictates) entitles this type of breeder the right to profit, it is ironic that it is their lowest consideration in making the decision to breed. Such breeders will only offer their pups on limited registrations as well. This means that the new owner cannot breed the pup they are receiving. This practice is followed because reputable breeders do not want people producing inferior quality pups with their kennel name in the pedigree.

Reputable breeders produce pups for a variety of reasons. Some compete in conformation, obedience, and agility while others may produce pups for therapeutic or service uses. In fact, this is what we breed our dogs for. Our purpose dictates the type of dog we want to produce and therefore the specific pedigrees that we will utilize. For example, in breeding dogs for children with Autism we want to find bloodlines that have exhibited a keen sense of perception toward a human's feelings. While this is our main concern it is also important for that the dog produced exhibits acceptable conformation. This is true because form leads to function. Therefore, if the conformation of the dog is not proper it can lead to physical problems down the road.

This is extremely important because poor conformation can lead to a dog that moves incorrectly. Over time an incorrect gait can lead to joint problems, bone problems, etc. These problems can cause the dog pain. Dogs have a good ability to mask pain. However, if they do so an unsuspecting person can approach the dog to pet it at a time when the dog does not want to be touched. Although this is an assumption, I would think that a dog in pain is more likely to become defensive and agitated than one who is not. Does this mean that dogs bred by reputable breeders will never develop ailments? The answer is a resounding no. However, truly reputable breeders understand the logic I present above and do their best to produce all around quality dogs.

Finally, all reputable breeders start out with a mentor. This is someone who can teach them the "ropes". A good mentor is invaluable in helping the novice breeder learn about pedigrees, how to evaluate a dog, chose breeding stock along with a host of other things.

- Backyard breeder – This breeder along with the commercial breeder has no right to be breeding dogs. They give all dog breeders a "black eye." Typically the backyard breeder is an animal lover. They may have a particular fondness for a specific breed. They may be a person who thinks their own dog has the greatest temperament in the world or they may want their children to see a litter of pups being born. These are not good reasons to have a litter of puppies.

Since reputable breeders will not allow new owners to breed their pups, the backyard breeder has to acquire their breeding stock from a less than reputable breeder (i.e., puppy mill or another backyard breeder). Since their breeding starts off with inferior quality there is no chance that they will produce high quality. However, this is just the beginning of the problem.

The disposition of a pup as mentioned above is the result of both hereditary factors and environmental factors (nature and nurture). Backyard breeders have no education with respect to the proper methods of early neurological stimulation methods, socialization techniques or the environmental factors required to maximize the benefits of early socialization.

This combination of unknown genetics and questionable practices related to socialization place the adoptive family at an extreme disadvantage relative to the family who purchases their pup from a reputable breeder.

Caveat emptor is the first rule of acquiring a puppy. If the breeder does not ask a lot of questions about your family or if they cannot satisfactorily answer the very thoughtful list of questions you should have compiled before your visit, move on to the next breeder.

Finally, do not let the fact that a backyard breeder is offering a pup at what seems to be a "high" price fool you into believing they know what they are producing. Conversely, do not let a bargain price be the reason you acquire your pup from any breeder. The emotional and financial costs you may incur in the future will surely reveal that such a decision was a big mistake in hindsight.

- Puppy Mills – Puppy mills are also referred to as commercial breeders. Their sole reason for being in existence is to make a profit. While I am a capitalist and all for free enterprise I do not believe it should come at the expense of dog or the family that ultimately acquires it. There are two types of puppy mills, those that sell directly to the public and to pet stores and those that sell only to pet stores.

Puppy mills will have a good number of breeding dogs. Their dogs have questionable pedigrees yet they breed them over and over with no regard for what is being produced. For these breeders the pup may as well be a widget. It is a device that is meant to produce a profit.

The dog pens or areas of confinement at such places are often numbered so the employees can remember which dogs they are dealing with. Litters and/or pups will also carry an identifying number. The mills that sell to the public will present a good façade. For example they may have a website that is very appealing because it contains educational information (often pirated from other sites) as well as endearing pictures of their pups. While there is nothing wrong with this, for these breeders these devices are marketing tools meant to catch the impulse buyer who will purchase over the internet or the buyer who they know will not take the time to do the research or think about their decision to purchase once they have them on the property with the puppy in their arms. These irresponsible breeders thrive on such situations.

Commercial breeders that sell directly to the public will often base their health guarantees on stipulations that you use their veterinarian, vaccination protocol or purchase a food they recommend. Many times this is a food that only they distribute.

Since many people will not utilize this food one hundred percent of the time when the pup begins to exhibit the signs of its poor quality breeding the commercial breeder will ask if you have ever fed a food other than that they recommend. If so, they blame the problem on this fact. Such statements are nothing but misleading.

The reason such breeders can stay in existence is because people are too impulsive when it comes to making the decision to acquire a pup. Due to the quantity of dogs they breed each year they are bound to get "lucky" a few times and produce a healthy pup. They take the few gleaming letters of endorsement they receive from these owners and utilize them to attract more unsuspecting buyers. Reputable breeders may place letters of endorsement on their websites but they will also gladly provide you with the names of many others who have acquired a pup from them. Personally, I will give the name and number of any client that has acquired a pup from me to a prospective owner if the current owner will allow it. I want every owner going into the decision knowing both the good and the bad. As a reputable breeder I also know that the good comments will far outweigh the bad

Puppy Mills that do not sell to the public will sell to pet stores. These pups are extremely low quality. Unfortunately, the overhead carried by pet stores often results in these pups costing as much as a pup that one can purchase from a reputable breeder. So why do people purchase pups from a pet store. First, they cannot let the pup down once it is in their arms. It becomes an emotional decision. Marketers love when people make emotional or impulse decisions. Second, if a family and children are part of the equation, the chants and chides of the child "we want the puppy" pull at the heartstrings of the parent resulting in the same result.

At the outset of this article we addressed the canine bite "epidemic" in this country. Dr. Richardson's viewpoint is that breed bans are unlikely to reduce the number of bite incidents. He places responsibility for the "epidemic" on the owner. I agree with Dr. Richardson that the ultimate responsibility does lie with the owner. It is their responsibility to do the appropriate research, interview breeders, ensure proper early socialization and training, etc. However, the breeds that he identifies as "problems" (German Shepherds, Rottweilers, Doberman Pinschers and Pit Bulls) are all strong willed breeds that not only require thoughtful breeding but also experienced owners. Ensuring that the people who acquire these types of dogs are capable owners is the responsibility of the breeder. Additionally, four of the six interacting factors that the AVMA indicates are likely to reveal a dog's tendency to bite are either partially or completely controlled by the breeder. Therefore, the bite "epidemic" is the responsibility of both the breeder and the owner.

The statistics quoted in Clay Evans article could lead the uninitiated reader to believe that the Labrador retriever is a dangerous dog. The fact is that the Labrador retriever is a wonderful dog. It possesses a keen intelligence, kind temperament and strong desire to interact with humans. However, the Labrador retriever has been the leading breed in terms of new AKC registrations for fifteen years. This popularity has led to people producing the dogs purely for profit. Such breeders as I have already shown do not comprehend the importance of genetics and early environment in producing a dog that will exhibit these qualities. This, my fellow dog lovers, is why you must be sure you find a reputable breeder to acquire your next pup from.

About the Author: Charlie Petrizzo, certified dog trainer, has worked with dogs and horses for more than twenty years. He trains dogs for private clients and breeds and trains Labrador retrievers for children with disabilities. He earned a bachelor's degree from St. John's University in New York, a diploma from The Animal Behavior College and is a candidate for an advanced diploma in canine fitness and nutrition from Cynology College. His personal story, including recovery from two life altering accidents that left him temporarily paralyzed and permanently scarred from burns over two thirds of his body, is truly inspirational. Charlie is a dynamic and motivational speaker. His website is www.circleoflifecanine.com. He can be reached at ak9nose@earthlink.net.