

Puppy Predictions: Early Recognition of Future Behavior Problems

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Behavior problems are the major reason that dogs are relinquished to shelters. Some problems represent pathology, others are normal behaviors that could not be accepted by the owner. To loosely paraphrase, acceptable is in the eye of the beholder.

If only we could look at a puppy and know just what behaviors she will exhibit when she is a grown dog. To that end, temperament tests have been designed and refined for years. Can they predict future behavior? Can they predict future skills? The answer: only so much.

Still, it is worth considering the information that is available. Veterinarians can be a valuable resource for clients that are seeking to adopt a new pet. Once a puppy has been adopted, the veterinarian should be prepared to offer advice regarding reasonable expectations for both physical and behavioral development. If there is evidence to suggest potential problem behaviors, clients can be counseled regarding the appropriate management of these behaviors.

Temperament testing

Some behavioral tendencies will not change. It is considered that temperament traits have a strong genetic component and are present at early stages of development. These behavioral traits are then used to characterize repeatable reactions of an individual animal.

Yet behavioral testing to identify fundamental behavioral tendencies of puppies remains challenging. Most research projects that evaluate temperament tests have been designed to improve the ability to predict future trainability of working dogs rather than on to identify the suitability of a puppy for a particular pet dog home.

What is normal?

We have limited data regarding normal puppy behavioral development. From an ethological standpoint, it makes sense for a puppy to be friendly and mildly submissive in response to mild social threats. Puppies have limited weapons. It would not be valuable for a puppy to threaten an adult dog. Or person for that manner.

An animal of any age will fight when a stimulus is overwhelmingly frightening. If brute force is used to wrestle a puppy to the table to draw blood, and that puppy attempts to bite, well, the puppy is not necessarily abnormal.

However, when we attempt to gently examine a puppy, with minimal restraint in a quiet environment, and that puppy growls or snaps, then a red flag should wave. This puppy is exhibiting a level of fear that is out of proportion to the trigger. He may exhibit similar fear in other situations. Left untreated, future veterinary visits may become the stuff of nightmares. Or at the very least, will be unpleasant.

More important, the owner of this puppy needs to be advised that you are concerned about the behavior. This puppy may not be developing normally. Behavioral recommendations should include exercises in gentle handling as well as socialization and exposure of the puppy to assorted relevant situations. Teach owners to recognize subtle signs of fear, aggression and distress so that they can intervene appropriately.

Early identification of both aggression and abnormal anxiety are important. Anxiety can be the root of many future behavior problems including aggressive behavior. Profound fear of noises and social phobias can be debilitating to the dog, negatively impacting the quality of life for both dog and family.

Can future anxiety be predicted? Dr. Martin Godbout designed a study to address this point. He followed puppies as they developed into young dogs, and discovered that yes, certain behaviors that were identified during the initial examination could be used to predict future anxiety. Early intervention may be effective in reducing the intensity of any future anxiety-based responses.

Breed tendencies

It is not appropriate to be a "breedist". Within any breed there will be a range of personalities and temperaments. Each individual possesses different genes, coding for different proteins and different behaviors. And despite breed, environment can modify phenotypic behavior.

Still, there are some expectations that are likely to be filled as a puppy of a known breed matures. Rottweilers are likely to grow larger than 70 lb and are likely to have some degree of territorial behavior. To be true to standard, they should be slow to react, with a low level of suspicion. With socialization and training, a normal Rottweiler can learn that guests entering the home do not represent any threat and can be neutral to friendly. But a client that has an open door policy might be better off choosing a dog that does not already have a heritage of guarding.

Similarly, small herding breeds that lack hard eye often bark. They can be trained to perform alternative behaviors, but a Shetland sheepdog may not be a good fit for a person that abhors barking.

Preadoption counseling: the veterinarian's role

Preadoption counseling is an invaluable service. If a family seeks a purebred dog, ask them to come in with a list of 10 breeds that they have considered. That will help you learn a bit about their preferences regarding size and general appearance. Then, you can discuss the health and behavioral expectations of those breeds.

First examination

Many times, the first veterinary check-up for a new puppy is not scheduled until a vaccination is due. That delay is not in the best interest of any parties. It is important to encourage clients to bring their puppy for a physical and behavioral evaluation as soon as possible after the adoption. A modified puppy temperament test can be done at this time.

Take time to observe the puppy. Let her roam as you collect background information. Allow the puppy to wander and explore, play and interact with you in a casual manner.

The office visit should be an opportunity to review normal socialization and offer preventative behavioral advice. Clients always welcome suggestions regarding housetraining and crate training. Dogs whose owners received advice from behaviorists exhibited fewer nuisance behavior problems. Explain the benefits of puppy socialization classes and the value of reward based training. Demonstrate appropriate toys and recommend relevant literature and humane trainers.

Inquire about the owner's goals for this puppy. For example, if children are in the puppy's future, present guidelines for safe and appropriate introductions. A therapy dog needs to learn to sit quietly and accept attention; now is the time to begin this training as well.

Behavioral concerns

If the puppy spends 10 minutes hiding in the corner, trembling, growling, or barking, then that puppy needs some immediate help. He probably won't do better next time. Schedule a behavior consult for a comprehensive evaluation.

Even young puppies may need a therapeutic program that includes systematic desensitization and counterconditioning to some of the fear-inducing stimuli. Technician visits can be arranged to keep the client on track until your next appointment.

Pharmacological intervention can be appropriate in young puppies. Safe anxiolytic medications and nutraceuticals are available. Pheromone impregnated collars are also available. Studies suggest that such collars may help young puppies adapt to their environments. Before recommending any therapy, including things as seemingly benign as collars, risks and benefits should be evaluated and discussed with the client.

Prognosis

If aggression is displayed, clients need to understand that despite intervention, aggression can escalate as a dog matures, particularly if there is already a component of anxiety. Parents of young children may not be willing or able to manage this puppy.

Your findings may dissuade the client from keeping this particular puppy. It is better to discover a mismatch now. A behavioral burden in one home may thrive in a different environment.

By the way, it is perfectly appropriate to refer a young puppy to a behavior specialist!

References

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