

Newbies News:

Choosing A Puppy: Testing the Temperament

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In our last article we discussed "Choosing a Puppy: Which One Is Right for Me?" We talked about evaluating four aspects of the puppy so far: physical health, correct structure, proper cosmetics, and breed type. Now, we want to address the most important factor when choosing a puppy, and that is sound temperament. It matters not how beautiful a dog is if he or she has an unstable temperament. You will want to observe each potential puppy's temperament both with and without their littermates.



Begin by discussing with the breeder what he has observed in regard to each puppy's temperament. You will want to ask the breeder where each puppy fits in the pecking order. Each pup's place in the hierarchy of the litter will exhibit different personality traits. You need to ask yourself if you can handle something at the top of the pack. Do you want an alpha or beta dog, or is something towards the middle of the pack's pecking order better suited for you? This is a personal matter. Regardless, you should probably avoid any overly shy puppies.

By this time in the evaluation process, you should have eliminated enough of the pups in the litter that you are down to choosing between 2-4 pups. I recommend that you take each pup away from his familiar surroundings and put him through a standardized puppy temperament test. There are various tests that you can use. A widely accepted battery of tests is known as the Volhard Puppy Aptitude Test. We have used it for several years in our kennel and are quite satisfied with the findings. You can easily obtain a copy of this recommended test by doing a simple internet search.



The time from birth through 7 weeks is critical to sound temperament development. This is known as the canine socialization period. A puppy should not be taken away from its littermates (except for brief periods of time) and should maintain contact with the dam. The dam plays a vital role in the pup's life during this stage, as she provides early discipline and training. Littermates also play an important role in each pup learning how

to properly interact with others of their species. A pup that is removed from its dam or litter too early will not develop proper temperament toward other dogs and later will exhibit behavioral problems of being either overly aggressive or overly submissive when encountering other dogs.

The next critical stage in a puppy's temperament development is ages 8 weeks through 12 weeks. This is often referred to as the human socialization period. During this span of time, the puppy establishes its strongest bonds. If left with its dam and littermates during this period, the puppy will develop a pack mentality and not bond as well with human beings. If placed in a loving home with daily human interaction during this period, the puppy will be much more likely to develop a human-dog bond and be more trusting of people. With the Rottweiler breed, it is absolutely imperative that your puppy receives early and ongoing socialization with people! It is best to take your new puppy home between 8 and 9 weeks of age and avoid any breeder or kennel where litters do not receive a lot of human interaction from birth.

Along with the Volhard Puppy Aptitude Test, I also recommend a hands-on temperament test. To administer this test, slowly, gently and securely turn the puppy over on its back and cradle it like a baby in your arms and against your body. Make sure the puppy feels safe and secure in how you are holding it so that what you observe in this evaluation is actually the puppy's temperament traits and not a fear of falling. What I want to see when I perform this test is a puppy that is confident and strong in nerves. I want him to show a level of relaxing and a maintaining of looking me in the eyes. When evaluating structure on the exhibition table, this is also a good time to check the puppy's confidence level while on a raised platform. Most puppies will be unsure if it is their first time on the table. Other signs that I may observe which would give me some concern are:

Lack of confidence, insecurity

It is not unusual for a puppy to hold on to your wrists when you are turning him over but if he continues to hold on after he is being held in a secure position then he is probably a puppy that is insecure and lacks confidence. These pups oftentimes grow up to become dogs who are unsure of themselves when brought to an unfamiliar environment and tend to shut down. At home they will stack out well and perform, but in the show ring they will not present themselves in the same fashion.

Fear

A puppy who lacks nerve and is fearful will usually be wide-eyed during this test. If you tip them down head first while securely holding them you will usually see the white of their eyes and their fear will be obvious. To confirm that the puppy has fear issues, you can further test them in regards to their sound-sensitivity. These pups will usually whimper and cry when startled. They will take flight if possible. Fearful pups should be avoided because they will probably mature into a dog who has an exaggerated response when startled. They can even become what is known as a fear-biter.

Aggression

An aggressive puppy will not let you hold it on its back regardless of how much you try to get it to relax. He may even claw and bite at you to free himself. Now, this is not necessarily a negative trait, but one you should be aware of because it is a sign of genetic temperament traits. This pup may prove to have very good temperament for dog sport, but not for an inexperienced home with small children.