

Both Ends of the Leash

Well Bred:

A three-pronged approach to keeping dogs out of shelters

Patricia B. McConnell

A while back, a couple – I'll call them John and Mary – came to see me because their dog had bitten a visitor. “He was just fine as a puppy, but now that he's older, he barks and growls at company as though he wants to eat them. The bite was the last straw – he hurt a good friend who came over to borrow a book and we still feel guilty about it.”

Because background information is always helpful, I started by asking them where they got the dog. “From a great breeder,” John answered. “She has lots of champions.” When I inquired if they knew much about the behavior of the dam and sire, Mary said, “Well, the mom was adorable, but we can't tell you anything about the father because we couldn't get near him. He was barking and showing his teeth, and neither of us wanted to go up and pet him. The breeder said he was just being protective of his puppies.”

Ah, the acorn doesn't fall far from the tree, does it? The couple's dog was acting exactly like his father – the father whom the breeder continued to use as a stud because long ago, he earned a title in the conformation ring. And this was a highly respected breeder, one whom many would call “responsible.”

But no, she wasn't. Breeding a dog with a predisposition to be aggressive to strangers is not responsible breeding. Breeding a dog with an undershot jaw, a potential for long-term health problems or genetically mediated behavioral instabilities is not “responsible breeding.” And yet it is done relatively often by those who breed show dogs, working dogs and companion dogs, as well as by those who allow dogs to come into the world because nobody was paying attention.

Irresponsible breeding is not news; we all know there's far too much of it going on in this country.



Breeders who fail their dogs and their clients are well known in dog circles, and are often publicly disparaged. But the flip side – breeders who are truly responsible – is often ignored, and I would argue that our companion animals suffer for it. What about those who breed their dogs carefully, select the right homes for the puppies and remain accountable throughout each dog's lifetime? Ah, but, one might say, how could anyone be considered “responsible” when they bring more dogs into a world where so many dogs are in shelters?

Before I go further, let me state unequivocally that the current focus on adopting dogs from shelters and rescues is a very, very good thing. We need to do everything we can to get dogs out of shelters and into good homes, and I am a stalwart cheerleader for those efforts. In years past, a long string of needy dogs wound its way through my farm, and when I “retire” enough to work just one full-time job, I will begin the process again. However – bear with me here – adoption and spay/neuter programs are only two-thirds of the picture. While rescue efforts have saved many, and spay/neuter programs have done a tremendous job reducing the numbers of dogs going into shelters, still, about two million dogs die in shelters every year. The solution is obvious, right? We should discourage any and all breeding, right?

That sounds reasonable, until you look at the 1995 research carried out by Gary Patronek and Andrew Rowan, who investigated the demographics of pet ownership and the number of dogs entering shelters. They found that about 7.3 million dogs are acquired annually as companion animals by U.S. Households, while an estimated 6.2 million puppies are produced

by breeders (both professional and backyard) and puppy mills. Futher, Patronek and Rowan estimated that about 4.4 million dogs enter shelters annually; 400,000 from amateur breeders who don't find homes for their litters, 2.2 million strays (600,000 of whom are reclaimed) and 1.8 million owner-surrenders. Of those, about 1.8 to 2.1 million dogs don't find new homes and die in shelters every year. But, if 7.3 million dogs are brought into homes every year, and only 6.2 million are produced, where do the "surplus" dogs come from?

We know the answer. Most dogs end up in shelters because of what owners describe as "behavioral problems." Many of these problems can be easily solved, but the dogs' first families either didn't know how or lacked the desire to deal with them. People who work in shelters know well that many of these "behavior problems" are often things like "doesn't come when called" (although the dog has never been trained to do so), or "chewed on shoe" (as a seven-month-old pup left alone in the house for eight hours did). The other common reason for surrender is economic. In some cases, people had no idea how much money it would take to raise a dog from puppyhood to maturity, or through no fault of their own, they lost the financial ability to care for a dog.

That is why, I would argue, the prevention effort needs a "third leg" to keep dogs from dying in shelters. That is where *responsible breeders* come in. Responsible breeders not only decrease the chance that a dog needs to be re-homed, they keep dogs out of shelters in the first place by following them throughout their lives and being willing to provide a home if one becomes necessary.

It's not easy to be a responsible breeder; it requires a major commitment of time, energy and knowledge. Good breeders carefully select a mating pair based on genetics and physical and behavioral health; care for the dam and litter as they should be cared for; provide an enriched environment for the maturing pups; sell only to the best of homes; provide lots of support for humane, effective training; and act as a resource (and possible home) for the rest of each dog's life. That's a huge effort, take it from me – I bred Border Collies for several years. My Lassie had two litters, and I still remember crying for days when a few of her puppies died of an unknown disease. I had her spayed (more tears), even though we had no

idea whether or not the problem was genetically based.

As all responsible breeders do, I took dogs back at any age (nine years in one case) and worked with the dogs for many months before finding them just the right homes. I followed all the pups for years and, when needed, helped their guardians resolve any behavioral problems that developed. And yet, in some circles, when I mentioned that I bred dogs, I was treated as a social pariah. This is not uncommon – ask any good breeder. Truly responsible breeders are rarely reinforced for their efforts. More often, they are lumped in with irresponsible breeders and castigated. Given that the good breeders are the ones who are keeping dogs out of shelters and rescue groups in the first place, it's a sad irony that doesn't do anyone any good.

Everyone knows that a tripod is sturdy because it has three legs. That's what we need: a three-pronged approach to keep dogs from dying in shelters and to provide relief for overwhelmed rescue clubs. Encourage everyone, except responsible breeders, to spay and neuter their dogs, encourage more adoptions from rescues and shelters, and as importantly, reinforce responsible breeding through public education efforts about what that entails, along with an occasional pat on the back to those who do it well. After all, isn't positive reinforcement effective in all species?

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