

# Both Ends of the Leash

## Aggression

### Is it in the breeding?

Patricia B. McConnell

I wish I hadn't seen the pictures. Although they were horrible enough. It was the look on her face. Alone in a hospital bed, nightgown pulled off to reveal the injuries, the 10-year-old girl was being victimized yet again. First she was mauled by two dogs in her friends' front yard, now she was helpless and humiliated, violated this time by a police photographer recording her injuries.

It is the second case I've seen this year in which young children have been severely injured because their friends played fast and furious with their daddies' fighting dogs. The little girl above had angered her friend, who had blurted out, "Get the meat!," the cue she'd heard her father say to start the dogs fighting. It took 10 minutes to get the dogs off the little girl.

I imagine that you might react as I did, disgusted by a father who would allow something like this to happen, by the mindless combination of his young, unknowing child and an animal he had exploited for his own amusement. It is easy to be shocked by the behavior of our own species. At times I am almost dumbstruck by the things that some people do with dogs. For example, I'm not sure that I want to meet the person who advertises his Caucasian Mountain Dogs as having "the knock-down power of a .45...with intelligence!" (I talked to a breeder of Great Pyrenees livestock guarding dogs once, who told me that his breed "was a loaded gun waiting to go off." My sweet, gentle Great Pyrenees, Tulip, is curled up snoring at my feet as I write this. She's six years old, and apparently is still waiting to "go off." Don't hold your breath.)

I could go on, as I imagine we all could, with story after story of stunningly irresponsible things that people say about dogs, that people do with dogs that get other people hurt, that get individual dogs in big trouble and that create breeds with bad reputations.



But that's too easy. That's about them. You know – "them," the people who don't read this magazine. The people who don't raise, train or manage their dogs responsibly. "Them," as in, "not us."

But I'm going to talk about us. Because even though two cases of fighting dogs turning on a child are more than enough, those are, thankfully, rare. But less dramatic cases, in which people get hurt or scared by dogs (cases that are not sensational enough to make the daily news in other words), are not as rare as you might think. At Dog's Best Friend, Ltd., Dr. Karen London and I see aggression cases all week long. What we see day in and day out is this: a dog who at eight weeks is growling/snarling over having his rawhide taken away. Or the dog who works himself into a frenzy of aggression during thunderstorms, in spite of his owner's gentle attempts to manage him. Or a dog who growls, snaps and possibly bites when visitors enter the house. Or a dog who didn't want to get off the bed, and so bit up his owner's arm, crunching his way through her forearm, her elbow and her shoulder, until he finally attached himself to her ear.

Of course, because we specialize in working with canine aggression, it's not surprising that we see a litany of trouble. What's relevant to this column is where the dogs come from, and who owns them. The answer is simple: they come from everywhere. From backyard breeders, from well-known show kennels, from humane societies, from champion field trial lines, you name it. They're mostly owned by nice, responsible people, many who have had dogs before and never had any trouble. In other words, they come from, and are owned by – us. Ouch. It's

so much easier to focus on the dramatic horror stories, the huge, dangerous dogs owned by strange people, “other” people. It makes me squirm to write this; I can only imagine what it feels like to read it. But the fact remains that, although most of the 52 million dogs out there are remarkably polite, too many of them are too quick to use their teeth to solve a problem.

Barbara Woodhouse once said that “There are no bad dogs.” Maybe not, but surely we'd all agree that some dogs are better than others. And some dogs are more likely to hurt people than others, and some of the traits that make them that way are inherited, as are physical traits like coat color and the shape of a dog's ears. I don't want to imply that breeding is the only factor in whether a dog might or might not be dangerous. It's not. Much of the aggression that we see has nothing to do with genetics. Much of it is clearly, and often tragically, explained by ignorant owners. Educating owners about how to humanely and effectively train a dog can have a profound effect on decreasing aggression. That's such an important topic that it deserves its own column. But I'm going to put it on a “sit/stay” for now, because this column is about genetics, and the importance of dog owners and dog breeders alike understanding how big a role good breeding can play in behavior.

There seem to be two extremes along the continuum of expectations that we humans have of our dogs: those dog lovers who don't know that training can solve myriad problems and those who believe that training can solve everything and anything. But as miraculous as good training is, it can't solve everything, anymore than the best coach in the world can make me a world-class basketball star. Learning and experience have to filter through the genetic blueprint that every dog starts with, and some dogs come equipped with designer plans for trouble. It's just a biological truth that there are some traits, many of them greatly affected by genetics, that can make a dog more likely to be aggressive than others.

One of those traits is shyness. Shyness is simply the fear of unfamiliar things, although it seems many of us like to avoid that word. “He's not really shy, he's just cautious of people he doesn't know.” That would be, uh, shy. Shyness is highly heritable: You don't pass on a lot of genes in the wild if you continue the mindless curiosity of a young pup as an adult.

Surprises usually aren't good if you live a life on the edge of survival. Of course shyness is also influenced by early environment, but because of individual differences, some dogs are at greater risk of developing into shy adults than others.

Like all the heritable traits that I'm going to talk about, shyness is not a digital trait, where a dog is either shy, or not. It's a continuum. And like all the other traits, it in itself doesn't cause dogs to bite. Some shy dogs hide behind their owners' legs all their lives. It's a combination of traits that creates dogs who hurt people. The shy dogs who get in trouble are also dogs who have what behaviorist William Campbell calls “active or passive” defense. “Passive” vs. “active” defense is the difference between the dog who stands and trembles when a stranger reaches out to pet her, and the dog who snaps at any hand near her head. Of course, sometimes both of those responses can be seen in the same dog, usually dependent upon her age and experience in life, but a dog's genetic complement is an important factor in how she's going to respond at any age.

Another trait that seems relevant is a dog's predisposition to use his mouth. It seems that all dogs don't come with an equal tendency to use their mouths to solve problems. For example, my Border Collie Pip apparently didn't read the chapter on Border Collies. Pip doesn't work my sheep, because if they confront her, she licks their noses and wags her tail (right before she turns and runs away). It quite simply has never occurred to her that she can use her mouth, not only to defend herself, but to get the sheep to respect her.

There are many other traits that seem to affect how likely it is for a dog to become aggressive to humans. I suspect that dogs who are what I call “status seeking” are much more likely to bite when you go to nudge them off the bed. Some dogs seem to have no frustration tolerance and lose their tempers when they don't get what they want. Some dogs are more “reactive” than others, alerting to the slightest stimulus and unable to recover from arousal after working themselves into a frenzy, while their brother is still yawning on the dog bed.

And let's face it: size matters. Take it from someone who has made a living for years working in a small room with dogs who bite people. Having a 10-pound

dog bark and lunge at you is simply not the same as having a 90-pound dog do it, no matter what the breed. Some little dogs have huge teeth (ever looked in the mouth of a Jack Russell Terrier?), but the psychological impact of having a small dog try to hurt you is simply not the same as having a big dog do it. Little dogs may be able to hurt you, and very badly at that, but they're not going to bring you down to the ground. Want to be in the room with a fearfully shy, reactive, "active defense reflex," status-seeking, 120-pound dog with no frustration tolerance? (Why is it that the phrase "the knockdown power of a .45" comes to mind right now?)

The irony here, and the gist of this column, is that we know a great deal about the genetics of temperament in canids, but we're not using it to our advantage. In a profoundly important experiment, a biologist named Belyaev began breeding Russian fur foxes for "docility." He divided the foxes into three categories: those who bit or tried to flee if you reached toward them with one hand while holding food out with the other, those who stood immobile, and those who encouraged contact by licking the experimenter's hands, whining and wagging their tails. By breeding the foxes who solicited contact with unfamiliar humans, he developed a line of foxes who not only responded with docile greetings to strangers, they developed other characteristics of domestic dogs like piebald fur (think Springer Spaniel or Border Collie), curled tails and changes in rates of development. Some of them even went into heat twice a year instead of once a year, just like domestic dogs compared to wolves and Basenjis! In just 30 generations he created what he called the "domesticated elite," a line of foxes who enthusiastically licked the hands of strangers, rather than snapping at them.

But where is the blue ribbon for a docile dog? Exactly what social support and rewards do breeders get for selecting for docile dogs? Conformation shows select for, well, conformation, and the ability to "show well." Does "showing well" relate to being a good pet? Not necessarily. Field trials for Retrievers select for drive and stamina, dogs with a "never say die" attitude that doesn't always make them the best addition to a suburban family. Of course it's not just determination that wins a dog a field trial title; a dog can't win without being superbly trained. Obedience is important in field trials, as it is

in obedience trials and agility and herding competitions. But being able to learn to work as a team and to really listen to your team leader during a performance is not the same thing as docility, or lack of shyness or a lack of frustration tolerance. The only title that comes close to testing for manners is the Canine Good Citizen award. It's a fine effort in the right direction, and we need to acknowledge it and work on promoting and improving it. Exactly how much attention do these dogs get? Is there a star-studded night of glitz and big money that celebrates them every year?

And how many dog owners know how important it is to pay careful attention to dispositions of the parents of their potential new pups? Most of the clients in my office, who are smart, responsible people, didn't know to ask the breeder what the personality of the dam and sire was. Many of them didn't even ask about the sire, or didn't think to wonder why they weren't allowed to meet their puppies' mom. I've had hundreds of people in my office over the years who explained that they couldn't tell me what the disposition of a pup's father or mother was because they couldn't get near them for all the barking and the snarling. Sigh.

It is important to acknowledge here the many people who do pay careful attention to disposition. I know herding dog breeders who breed for useful working farm dogs who can nip a steer on the nose to load it into a truck, but who would turn inside out before they snapped at a child. I know conformation breeders who want to win Westminster but would never breed a dog they wouldn't trust when the UPS man came. I know many dog owners who spent months carefully researching the breed, the right breeder and the right puppy.

Those wonderful people are out there. There are just not enough of them, and they don't get enough credit. Truly good breeders who do their best, make the tough decisions and keep making responsible decisions in spite of the pain and the cost are out there, but they just don't receive much recognition. Some people even talk as if "breeding" were a dirty word, given all the dogs at shelters who need homes. But we know from research that those dogs are most often adolescents or older dogs, who had no responsible breeder to go back to when things didn't work out. Good, responsible breeders and well-

educated puppy buyers can do much to keep dogs out of shelters in the first place.

So here's to you: to the people who know that breeding a dog least likely to hurt someone is more important than anything in the world. To the people who know that although training and conditioning can, and do, solve a myriad of problems, it is best to start at the beginning, with a sound set of genes that mean training is like paddling downstream instead of up it.

People often ask me what makes a dog “dangerous.” There simply is no one thing. I've met dogs who grew up starving, were tied to a stake and who were teased relentlessly, and yet after that terrible start, they never growled or snapped at anyone. I've met dogs from sweet, docile parents who turned into monster dogs, Jeffrey Dahmer dogs, because of a tragic combination of the wrong genes in the wrong learning environment. Aggression isn't simple, because behavior isn't simple. But what is simple is that we're not doing as much as we can to breed docile dogs. It's true that breeding for huge fighting dogs is terrifyingly wrong. But it's equally true that breeding and picking puppies without enough concern for docility is also wrong. This issue of dangerous dogs is not just about them. It's about us. Ouch.

*Patricia B. McConnell, PhD, is an animal behaviorist and ethologist and an adjunct professor in Zoology at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, as well as the author of numerous books on behavior and training.*

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