

TALES FROM A DOG BEHAVIOURIST:

Breeds and Breeding

Have you ever heard of a Broholmer? Or a Dunker? How about a Stabyhoun? You'll be forgiven if you've never heard of these breeds of dogs, uncommon as they are in our country. However, South Africa is home to over 200 different breeds of dogs, including variations of each breed. For example, there are four different types of sheepdog, and eight varieties of spaniel. Terriers win the variation contest hands down; there are about twenty-four distinct types of terrier in South Africa alone.

Canis lupus (Grey Wolf) has come a long way in a relatively short space of time. From a single species, humankind selected those traits deemed most desirable and the result is a staggeringly diverse multitude of breeds of dog. Our eyes tell us that there is little family resemblance between a wolf and a Dachshund, proving the enormous power that careful breeding can have. The wolf is more apparent in dogs' behaviour than anywhere else, and more so in some breeds than in others. For example, Huskies retain almost all their instinctual, ancestral behaviours, whereas French Bulldogs only display a few wolfish behaviours. The 'wolf behaviours' in question are those related to aggression and submission, and no matter how much of these behaviours a breed may lose, all dogs retain a keen understanding of the most important wolf behaviour: pack hierarchy.

The positive side of selective breeding is instantly recognisable: people could breed dogs to suit almost any need, any sort of work, and unfortunately, any type of entertainment. Those cute wrinkles on bulldogs were selected so that when they were used for fighting, the blood would drain away from their eyes. Labradors have webbed toes to aid them when swimming. The droopy ears on a Basset Hound gather scent and encourage them to follow trails of scent. The Lhasa Apso was designed to be small and have a long coat so that they could sit on the laps of monks in Tibet, and keep them warm while they meditated. Jack Russells always have white on their coat because it allowed hunters to distinguish them from the foxes that were their prey. The list is endless. Every breed of dog, down to their body shape, size, coat and colouring, and their personality, has been selected for a specific purpose.

There is of course a down-side to selective breeding: it generally means a relatively small population of dogs from which to breed. This often results in in-breeding, which in turn

leads to both mental and physical problems. For example, some types of Collies are prone to Collie Eye Anomaly (an eye disorder); Newfoundlands can be susceptible to Cystinuria (a type of kidney disease); and Cocker Spaniels can get the so-called 'rage syndrome', a mental defect that results in fits of aggression.

It is for these reasons that it is so very important to seek out a reputable breeder when thinking of getting a puppy. Good breeders carefully select which dogs they breed from. This ensures that in-breeding does not happen, and that the breed as a whole remains healthy, and that genetic defects are slowly bred out. Bad breeders are those who breed without adequate knowledge, and usually just for profit. Puppies (and kittens) on sale at pet shops are usually from puppy mills, where dogs are kept in deplorable conditions and used as breeding (and money-making) machines. A good breeder would never allow their puppies to be sold under such conditions. Also, bad breeders are only interested in producing dogs that 'look right'; superficial characteristics of the breed are all-important. Even then, the dogs rarely conform to the high standards of what a particular breed of dog's body should be like. Physical health and temperament are far down the list of priorities for these breeders.

There are countless types of dogs, a breed to suit every person and every situation. Always research the breed of dog you are interested in, because they are all unique. Exercise requirements, level of grooming, adaptability to home environments, and personality and temperament are all factors to be carefully considered before getting a dog. A dog is an incredible privilege, and as such should be carefully considered. The second most important decision is where to obtain a dog, and in my opinion there are only two places: shelters and good breeders. Consulting with a good breeder not only ensures that you receive the best possible example of the breed, but you will also be supporting the massive efforts that go into maintaining and protecting that breed.

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