

# Understanding Dogs

## Temperament in Dogs – Its Role in Decision Making

by Dr. Radcliffe Robins

What is meant when we speak about the temperament of a dog? This term is very often used, but very little understood by the users. It is however clear that by using the term an attempt is being made to define or describe certain attributes of the dog's behaviour. What specifically is being described?

How does the knowledge of temperament affect the decisions about the dog made by the shelter? Should the dog be placed at all, or euthanased? Should it be placed in a family with young children or in a single person household? Is this dog temperamentally appropriate for an older person? Will its mental characteristics allow it to be a good companion, and provide some measure of joy and comfort to its owners, or will it be a burden to them? These are some of the questions that this presentation will help you to answer.

Before giving a practical and working definition of temperament I would like to share with you a few variants that can be found in the literature.

1. Norma Bennett Woolf (Dog Owner's Guide), describes temperament as "the general attitude a dog has towards other animals and people." She continues "Temperament is inherited but can be modified or enhanced by the environment."

2. Two training specialist and canine behaviourists Joachim Volhard and Gail Fisher define Temperament as "the dog's suitability for a specific task or function." They explain further, "there are no good or bad temperaments," only "suitable or unsuitable" ones.

3. GoodPooch.com supports Volhard and Fisher's view and goes on to state, "Simply put, the term "temperament" is similar to the word "personality."

The above views suffer significant disadvantages.

In the first case "general attitude" is an interpretation of the observer and lends itself to subjective interpretation. The general attitude of a young boisterous, possibly dog aggressive Rottie, may mean something quite different to a police officer looking for a replacement dog, than to a young Mon who loves the breed. Besides, the temperament of the dog may also be determined by its behaviour in environments devoid of animals and people; for example, dog in an enclosed parking lot, dog left alone in a room.

The second case stresses the task suitability or use of the dog, rather than its innate characteristics. The external controllable factors that the humans select, take precedence rather than the innate (genetic or congenital) characteristics of the dog. But what indeed are the innate characteristics, how do these characteristics influence the use of the dog?

In the third case it is clear that trying to understand or describe the "personality" of the individual dog is a daunting (scientific) task. We do understand what the author is trying to say, but this understanding does not lend itself to clarity, practical application and objectivity.

Each agrees that there are different types of temperaments, but may disagree what these types are.

The concept of Temperament that I use and highly recommend to you is defined by Wayne Davis of the West Virginia K9 College as:

**“The physical and mental characteristics of an individual dog, made evident through its reaction to stimuli in its environment.”**

The physical and mental characteristics or peculiarities of an individual dog, made evident through its reaction to physical and situational stimuli, that is, any change in its environment.

This definition is not just a theoretical concept it is a practical working tool. Davis' concept of temperament has certain characteristics that cannot be separated from it.

## **Characteristics of Temperament**

Temperament is primarily a function of the dog's neurological makeup

Temperament is 100% genetic; it is inherited, and fixed at the moment of the dog's fertilization/conception/birth

Temperament in the dog cannot be eliminated nor transformed from one type to another. It cannot change during the dog's lifetime. It is the permanent mental/neurological characteristic of the individual dog. But there may be an overlap of different temperaments in the same dog. For example sharpness may be seen with over aggression or submissiveness with being temperamental.

Environment, Socialization or Training can modify the expression of an individual dog's temperament, but they cannot transform it nor eliminate it. The dog will die with the temperament with which it was born.

In other words, the sum total of the dog's neurological and physical matrix that finds expression as a result of environmental change (people, animal, physical context or situations), is its temperament. This view of temperament is objective in its definition, and clear in its physical expression, and for this reason will form the platform of our subsequent discussion.

Temperament is divided into two broad categories: Sound Temperament and Unsound Temperament.

## **Sound Temperament**

The dog with a Sound Temperament is confident and self assertive. He is sure of himself and investigates what he is unsure of. He handles his environment with confidence and without fear. His approach to life and his environment is curious, assertive and investigative. If startled or frightened, he recovers quickly from his fright.

This wonderful ideal is not without its concerns. This dog makes an excellent pet and worker, when under control, trained or managed by a handler who is a secure pack leader. However if uncontrolled his self-assertiveness could lead to significant management problems. Nonetheless the mental balance of this kind of dog makes him a joy to own, and more persons need to learn to learn the skill to manage this exemplary canine. Having said this, it is clear that an older couple seeking a companion may be better served with a more submissive animal.

## **Unsound Temperament**

The dog of Unsound Temperament does not display the above calm, confident, self assertive, non-fearful behaviour. There is a range of behaviours considered to be unsound, but the

following list can be taken as a complete or almost complete list of the variations: Sharp, Shy, Sharp-Shy, Submissive, Temperamental, Hyperactive, and Overaggressive.

### **Sharp Temperament**

A dog with a sharp temperament reacts (immediately) to **individual** environmental stimuli **without thought**. The dog does not consider consequences. It may jump sideways and run far away if startled by a slamming door, very reluctant to return, if at all. The sharp dog recovers, but slowly. The sharp dog may fearfully bark forever at the play of shadow across a doorway, or the light pattering of a small branch on the roof. If the stimulus is innocent and continuous, the sharp dog does not settle down and accept its innocence. It continues to react without thought. It will not investigate.

This dog may seem at first to be an excellent alarm dog, but extreme sharpness, coupled often with a lack of confidence, could make it a perpetual nuisance to neighbours and household members.

### **Shy Temperament**

The shy dog is afraid of unfamiliar people, places and things. He is sensitive to noise and movement, and does not take initiative. The shyer the dog is, the greater will be the amount of fear displayed. This genetic/temperamental shyness cannot be cured.

Shyness may also be caused by improper environmental socialization or people experiences. This shyness may be reversed to some extent by proper handling and training, but avoiding such an outcome right from the start is preferred. Shyness must not be confused with submissiveness.

### **Sharp-Shy Temperament**

The Sharp-Shy dog displays aggression based on fear; he is the classic "fear-biter." Being sharp, he responds without thinking, and being shy, he is fearful. This combination produces a dog that bites at any unfamiliarity without thinking. Fear is a normal reaction in a normal dog to a perceived threat, but when the threat is over, the dog should recover quickly. The sharp-shy dog recovers slowly; its fear may even paralyse it, and it may bite if touched. It may be taught to adjust in a particular environment or situation, but when that situation changes, it will react again in fear and the behavioural cycle starts over again. The Sharp-shy dog can never be fixed.

### **Submissive Temperament**

The submissive dog readily surrenders authority and control to its leader; in other words, he easily accepts human leadership. He tends to be meek and mild and non-threatening. He has no desire to be in charge, and readily does what is asked. This kind of dog makes an excellent pet and companion for most first time dog owners and the average family. The temperamentally submissive dog may be, but is not necessarily, a "wimp."

Submissiveness is also a trait that may be produced environmentally, by abuse. This should not be confused with the genetic submissive temperament.

### **Temperamental**

A dog with this temperament suffers from failure of its central nervous system. New environmental stimuli so overwhelm this dog that it may shake uncontrollably or roll over. The temperamental dog will empty its bladder and bowels seemingly unaware, in unfamiliar or

stressful situations. This dog is not just afraid - it cannot cope - with the stress. Its nervous system is so overwhelmed that the dog loses control of its body and bodily functions.

The temperamental dog is not usually aggressive, but it is important to remember that there is a lot of fear in this dog, and the fearful dog may respond by biting.

This trait is one step down from submissive, and cannot be fixed.

What type of companionship can this dog provide? He may not be suitable for most homes but may be looked after by someone who feels generally compelled to offer and provide perpetual psychological coddling to this kind of dog. This dog is not recommended.

### **Hyperactive Temperament**

The hyperactive dog is constantly moving, and generally moving fast. He constantly wants to move by running and jumping. If confined, he will pace incessantly and leap at walls, walk in circles or wag the tail non-stop. This hyperactivity is not normal but is the result of a metabolic malfunction (of the brain) that controls the body's activity.

This dog could be thoroughly destructive if kept in a confined apartment or small space.

In some cases it may be difficult to separate temperamental hyperactivity from normal high energy in some dogs.

### **Overaggressive Temperament**

The overaggressive dog reacts with more aggression than the situation suggests. This extreme behaviour is often directed toward the handler and is usually in protest for having been asked to do something the dog does not want to do. This dog does not turn off easily; he will come after you and hurt you. It does not accept human leadership.

An overaggressive dog should never be placed in a pet or companion situation. In fact if he is not in the hands of a professional handler, he should be put down.

Before ending this topic two other temperamental traits require our attention. They originate in the self-assertiveness of the dog (Sound Temperament) but may actually be looked upon as temperamental classes in their own right. These are the traits of Dominance and Independence in dogs.

### **Dominance**

The dominant dog strives to achieve pack leadership. The more dominant he is, the less likely he is to accept human leadership and training. He is confrontational. Such a dog requires a skilled handler who can maintain pack leadership at all times.

### **Independence**

This dog does not want guidance or affection from other dogs or humans. He does not encourage companionship; he cares nothing for praise or pleasing his handler. The independent dog keeps his own company, is self directed and self reliant; he is not affectionate.

Clearly, the independent dog would not make a good companion, and may function best as an out door "yard" dog.

A dog with significant dominance and independence traits together, is just a slide away from being over aggressive.

Even though critical periods, socialization and training may affect the temperament of a dog, they will never eliminate any of its effects.