

Puppies Are Not Robots

One aspect of my job as a Breeder is to be a matchmaker, pairing families and puppies. Before I can determine which puppy will best suit a family, I need to form a picture of the family's lifestyle, schedule, needs, and hopes for a puppy, and later, a grown dog.

Sometimes, I find that what someone tells me they WANT and hope for conflicts with what they NEED in their current life.

Here are two examples:

A woman came to me in hopes of finding a dog very similar to her recently deceased male. The dog had died at age 15. The woman now has a family with her 2nd husband and their children from previous marriages as well as children between them, ranging in age from 4-14.

She wanted a dog just like her last dog, whom she dearly missed. I asked some questions. The last dog was dominant, could not be around anyone other than immediate family (because he would bite people unpredictably), could not be trusted with the smallest children whom he had not known when he was a puppy, was aggressive to other dogs, & had developed some separation anxiety in his later years. He was also over protective, but she liked this because for some years, she lived alone with her kids and felt safe when he was guarding her family. I had to tell this woman that I would not sell her a dog with the type of character her last dog had! I would not sell her the most dominant dog, either. Why? She didn't NEED this! She NEEDED a very solid dog, a middle of the road dog who (with proper socialization) would be at ease with their busy family and the children's friends coming and going. What she THOUGHT she wanted was not what she NEEDED.

In the 2nd case, a retired K-9 handler came to me for a family pet. He had two young kids and a cat. He wanted a dog that he could do high level Schutzhund competition with, but a dog who would be great with his kids, his cat, and a nice family pet. He did not want the dog to be "hyper" and need to work all the time, the way his K-9 had, but he wanted strong drive in work. He also told me he was used to working with hard headed, tough as nails dogs, and he was comfortable with this type. He had adopted a 2 year old dog with some training, from a breeder, the prior year. But, the dog had been "crazy" in the home and with much sadness, they had given him back to the breeder.

Dogs are NOT ROBOTS. We can't program them to be tough as nails, hard, top schutzhund competitors that love cats and kids and won't need a lot of exercise in order to be quiet at home. Now, I am not saying a dog can't be all these things. But, I am saying that expectations need to be realistic because dogs are not robots! I did not place a dog in this home.

Many times the dream dog that is conjured for me is simply unrealistic. One very sweet woman was happy to give me details of her version of the perfect puppy. "Good with my family and all the people who might come and go to our home or yard, but understands the difference between friends and potential "bad guys". Easy to housebreak and smart enough to know not to go on the lawn but in a designated mulch area. Doesn't chew things up, is quiet when alone, likes to play but isn't hyper when not exercised, loves all ages of child, doesn't jump up, loves all other dogs, walks perfectly on a leash so he won't pull her or her kids over when walking, and he should look big and imposing. He should like to swim because the summer house is on a lake, but he should never go near the water when it is iced over in winter.

She confided that she might send the puppy off to a trainer who sends him back with all his basics in place. She might be interested in showing him, but otherwise he will be a family pet. And she might be interested in sending him for some protection training so he can protect her kids.

Sigh.

Puppies are not robots. Puppies are animals with thoughts, likes and dislikes of their own. They do not always behave as we dream them to, in our mental movies. Perhaps the individual puppy decides he does not care for water, or he does not intrinsically understand the difference between chewing his toys and the chair frame, when left alone all day.

Puppies come with individual quirks and characteristics, just like people. Some people love to swim, others do not. Some people want a house full of children, others do not. Some are interested in a sport, others are not. We are born with different aptitudes and interest in things. For example, horseback riding. Some riders are born with a seemingly natural talent, a natural "feel", and possess long legs and arms - which certainly makes looking the part of a graceful rider and finding balance much easier. How successful the natural born rider becomes, is often a product of not only developing our

initial natural aptitude, but also of nurturing and learning and practicing. It is also possible for a rider who is not blessed with long limbs and a natural feel, and who has no natural feel or balance, to become accomplished at riding.. but this person must work harder and be more dedicated in order to attain the level of riding that comes easily to the first rider.

My point here is that your puppy comes with raw material and genetic predisposition towards certain traits., and these will influence his behavior. Equally important is the work YOU put in to training him and developing his skills in particular areas. **Some dogs have more natural ability for particular things than others; they are not robots.**

Robots do not react on their own. They are programmed to respond to only particular cues. Dogs on the other hand, are influenced by many factors, and have a vast repertoire of reactions... as do their owner/handlers!

In my years teaching classes, I heard several versions of this next tale told over and over again. It went like this:

Brutus was the nicest puppy. He loved all the puppies at his class. When my sister came to visit last week, she brought her new puppy over. Brutus was not nice! He hasn't seen a puppy in a long time, but he used to like them! So, we took him the next day out to a park with lots of other dogs there, so he could socialize. We did that when he was small, but have not done it in over a year and a half. He growled when dogs approached us. We are angry at him and we may have to give him up because we were planning to get another puppy and fear he will hurt her!

Version Two:

Molly is the sweetest dog to me ,my husband, our teenage daughter and everyone she knows. We walk her daily in our neighborhood, and she is always well behaved. Recently, we were walking and I stopped to chat with my neighbor. Molly sat nicely and waited. Then, someone walked by on the other side of the street. He was minding his own business, not doing anything.. but Molly went crazy growling and barking and pulling on her leash! I don't understand why! Was she protecting me? Was she scared? Was he a bad guy and she knew it?

I was shocked. I yield at her and jerked her collar. Then I knelt and put my arms around her and told her she was being silly. The guy kept walking, and when he was out of sight, Molly calmed down.

A few days later, we passed a stranger on our walk, and Molly did the same thing! I yelled at her but she didn't stop.

The next time, I tried hugging her and talking softly to her as a stranger approached. She still went crazy.

Now, whenever strangers approach, I shorten my leash and try to move as far away as I can. And Molly is getting more and more difficult to control! We might have to give her away because we are afraid our daughter can't safely walk her anymore. We are in a neighborhood where she will have to meet people on walks every time she goes out!

There are several things that could have led to each of these dogs' behavior initially. And the owners have inadvertently done several things to help cement this behavior into a routine and exacerbate the problem. (I could write a whole separate piece on the reasons for the dog's behaviors and what the owners did right and wrong.) The owner's conclusions are similar - the dog is being BAD and they don't want a bad dog, or they don't wish to deal with the inconvenience the behavior creates, so they will have to give the dog away. (To some other home who is willing to work with the problem, even though the first owner, who raised and loved this dog is unwilling!)

Dogs are not robots. They sometimes do things we do not appreciate or understand. Have you ever had a friend behave in a way you disagreed with? Did you end the friendship due to this one difference in opinion? Has your child ever done something you are upset about? Did you disown him or put him up for adoption? When we make a commitment to a puppy/dog, we owe it to the animal and to ourselves, to put in the work, training, time, and exercise required to shape this dog's behavior in a way that suits our lifestyle. **Since dogs are not robots, this means we have to adapt and deal with non desirable behaviors when they come up. Many times, reactions that are NORMAL for a dog, are in direct conflict with how we WANT them to react.** Therefore, it is up to us to show them what we expect.

My final example is of a couple who came to me for a nice family pet. They had teenagers, and had raised a puppy before. (She had been with the family until she died, in old age.) They seemed like great owners, the family

was wonderful & I placed a very, very nice, high quality puppy with them. She was a laid back, easy going but very happy and social dog.

The wife frequently complained about typical puppy behavior. Puppy chewed, She had an accident. She didn't come when called. The wife also complained that the puppy was too attached to her, too much her dog, and she feared the puppy would have separation anxiety as her last dog had. (This was the first I heard of the last dog having separation anxiety!) She provided all puppy care and rarely left the puppy alone. I advised she begin leaving the puppy for short times, using the crate, teaching her she was safe by herself. I saw the puppy for a visit when she was still quite young, and I noticed the wife was a little overprotective of her, hovering over her and afraid to let her wrestle with other pups. I tried to explain that the owner should change her behavior so the puppy would not in turn become worried about other dogs.

Some time later, I saw the puppy again. This time, she was wearing an electronic collar. She was not yet 6 months old! And, the owner was not using the collar correctly. I was horrified. I tried to explain why I felt she was using the device inappropriately, but she was clearly not hearing me. She said her "trainer" had told her to use it and showed her how.

This woman was very sweet, but she was a terrible trainer and she had no idea what she was doing to her puppy. She sent mixed signals, she was not a good leader, she was uninteresting to her puppy. To her, the collar seemed to be a magic cure., but she was using it incorrectly - she called her dog to come without getting the puppy's attention, without using a happy or loud enough voice, with no real likelihood of being successful...and when puppy didn't look up from her wrestling with pals, the owner zapped the puppy til she looked up, saw the owner, and miserably came to her.

The poor puppy was confused and frustrated. She was mouthy when I ran hands over her while she sat - not in an aggressive way - in a frenetic.. "I am happy and want to say hi but might get scolded, so I am trying to sit still, I think I should, but I want to play with you.. I am frustrated so I will put your arm in my mouth -" kind of way! Luckily the puppy had a super stable character. A lesser dog would have cracked under this treatment. I felt terrible for the puppy.

This owner had absolutely No idea that while she was a loving owner, she was a terrible leader and terrible dog trainer. I think her "trainer" had given up on her and given her the collar because he couldn't get the owner trained, not because the dog needed an E collar! This woman wanted a puppy who was

perfectly behaved. She was not capable of training him How to develop into her version of perfect, and yet she wanted him to be a well trained mini-adult dog NOW. **She wanted a robot. But puppies are not robots.**

Before you commit to a puppy, you need to ask yourself some questions and give honest answers. If you don't KNOW the answers, you should talk to your breeder and perhaps the breeder can help you determine an answer.

- Are you a good leader? (*I am not of the belief that everything is about dominance/submission. But I do believe the ability to be a strong leader is a necessity!*)
- Do you understand how to clearly communicate your wishes to a dog, and how to time your praise and reward when the dog responds correctly?
- Are you able to establish rules and stick to them consistently? Is everyone in your household able to adhere to these rules, too?
- Are you willing to commit time to this puppy - time for ongoing training, exercise, socialization??? Socialization in appropriate situations is imperative and must be ongoing.
- If your puppy/dog begins to display unwanted behaviors, are you willing to acknowledge the issue and get help if needed, to work through the problem before it escalates and becomes a habit???
- **Do you understand dogs are not robots????????????????????**

For those of you who honestly want a robot.... I advise a computer pet such as a Webkin!