

Avoiding Shyness: A Primer for Breeders

By Carol Benjamin

*"A man's rootage is more important than his leafage."
Woodrow Wilson*

Shyness is epidemic among American dogs. The shy dog makes a poor showing in the ring. He makes an unsatisfactory pet. He should not be bred. His shyness sometimes leads to biting. Treated seriously, (after all, it is), and with courage and honesty, this problem could be virtually eliminated.

Shy Yields Shy

It should go without saying that no shy dog should be bred. If the shyness is caused by genetic factors, a new batch of puppies carrying this unfortunate trait will be brought into a world already overpopulated with problem dogs. If the shyness was environmentally caused in the bitch, it will be among the first traits she will teach her offspring. A shy mother raises shy children. And here, as elsewhere, we should remind ourselves that shy means fearful.

Even if your male were the shy one, could you ever be sure that his shyness was one-hundred percent environmental and would not be passed genetically to his offspring? Perhaps when genetic factors lean toward fearfulness, environmental factors can best take hold. Indeed, I have seen several dogs who should have been shy and fearful, dogs, for example, who stayed in a kennel situation much too long. Yet they exhibited no signs of shyness. Perhaps their genetic programming made for bold, thick-skinned, easy going dogs, dogs that could easily overcome the limitations caused by environment. Sadly, the reverse is more often the case--the pup that was kept a few extra weeks or months to see if it was a show prospect adjusted poorly to the change in environment. Many of these dogs get worse as they get older, becoming nearly psychotic when they are adults. Many do not respond to re-training or socialization of any kind. Preventing this trait, painful to dog and owner, is much easier than correcting it. And here's the good news, preventing it is easy--if you are a serious breeder, if you are honest and if you have courage. (I've got your number, right?)

Ways To Prevent Shyness

Following is a primer for avoiding shyness. Point one is a given. There are no exceptions. Not coat. Not gait. Not nothing. A shy dog is not like a Golden Retriever with a white spot on its chest or an off-color Pharaoh Hound. It won't make a good pet. It's worthless. The rest of the points take time. What doesn't when you breed dogs? What shouldn't? Sure, you've broken the record for feeding the most amount of dogs in the least amount of time, but only so you'll have more time to be with them, to socialize, to fondle and admire. Where better to spend your time than in improving the temperament of the dogs you've so carefully bred? Hence, one primer.

1/ Do not breed any dog, a male or female, who exhibits signs of shyness.

2/ Socialize all your puppies well and positively to males and females, children and adults.

3/ Offer your puppies a variety of sounds, sights, textures. Make sure that all your little puppies, by the time they are eight weeks of age, have walked on at least four different surfaces. Make sure that one of those surfaces is grass.

4/ Praise your litter of puppies--and each puppy you work with individually--for any new thing they do that could possibly be construed as positive. Any new thing. It does not have to look spectacular. But think about it. The first time a puppy put his paws on your wooden floor, the day he first climbs out of the whelping box (see 5.), it's a gigantic event for him. The floor feels nothing like newspaper or old carpeting or towels, or whatever else is the only thing he's been on. So tell him he's a brave puppy. He is. And the confidence he gains by walking on wood, rugs, bricks, slate, linoleum, grass, dirt, etc. will help him when it's time to climb his first flight of stairs, meet a cat, ride in the car, go to the groomer. He needs to be brave. Praise him when he is. Therefore--

5/ Let your puppies climb out of the whelping box. Of course you won't let them run around unattended when they're four weeks old, loose and lost in the kitchen or basement. But, when you're there and have the time, take down the boards and let your puppies feel their oats, those brave, little darlings. Let them climb over each other and escape. Let them be daring. Big deal if they urinate a little on your kitchen floor. You've got a mop, haven't you? So let those puppies test their brand new feet and brand new courage away from mother and their siblings, on new surfaces. Tell them what brave, good puppies they are, then kiss them and put them back with mommy. A two minute escape- excursion is a great experience for a little puppy. A kind of hedge against shyness. However--

6/ Do you have to stand on your head to find STRESS for your little puppies, in order to make them brave? Not on your life. There's more than enough stress in anyone's early life. After all, mom won't be there every minute. Even the most devoted dam will leave to relieve herself, to eat, and eventually, to rest, play, take a breather. And when you handle them, that's pleasant, but it's stressful as well. And when you clean the box and put them elsewhere for a moment, that's stress. See what I mean? Enough's enough.

7/ Give your litter experiences. The more things they face and conquer, the better puppies they will be, the better able to walk into the ring, heads high, the better able to put up with little Maryann's five girlfriends who've come to see her new friend, the better able to meet any new challenge that gets thrown at them. And life is full of those. We let our puppies run around in the basement while we cleaned their pen. Of course, then we had to clean the basement--and that took a longer time than cleaning the pen. But did those puppies ever have a good time! They found an old rug wrapped in cord. They removed the cord and invented the tug of war. They found my snow tires and jumped in them and hid. Then POUNCE. They jumped on any puppy dumb enough to pass the tire. They tried the steps. They played hide and seek. They got lost - and cried. And then they got found. And, most important, they got smart. At a very young age, they got to explore a larger world than their safe, little den, once or twice or three times a day. They overcame fear.

They met challenges. Then they got to go back to their warm blanket and be babies again. Back and forth it went. Their early life was chock full of experiences and it made them the very best dogs they could be.

8/ And then, when the puppies started to go to their new homes, we made sure that, for those who stayed with us beyond eight weeks of age, experiences increased and their little world was widened. Here, indeed, is the most important point, along with point one, of this article. If you are keeping your puppies beyond eight weeks--to see if they are show quality, to crop their ears, because you think they're just too young to go, you must get them off your property. In order for them to be able to adjust to moving later, to a true change of environment, they must experience that change starting at two months of age. Of course, you'll be careful to take them to places that are as clean as possible. I would not take pups that young to a park where lots of adult dogs play. But I would walk them, on show leads, down almost any suburban street. I would--and did--take them, one or two at a time, visiting to a friend's house. (Bring your own paper towels.) I would take them out any place I could get away with, so that they become super puppies, so that they do not get hooked on my home environment, so that they meet new people away from home, so that they overcome their fear of unusual noises, so that when and if they are sold, they will give their new owners the pleasure they deserve. Even if your home territory is 100 acres, it's still the same place to the puppy, He must have a true change in order to become casual about future changes in his life. He must become sophisticated. And that will only happen if he gets around. You can be creative and get your puppies out and around without exposing them unduly to viruses and parasites. We even took Scarlet down to the lobby of our apartment building so that she could see people coming and going, and so that she could be handled by them. We chose the cleanest streets we could find for walking her and, of course, we did not allow her to sniff the droppings of other dogs, if we saw any. We took her once, when she was small, to a Christmas party, by carrying her in a Canvas bag. Then she got to socialize with 25 strangers. She had a marvelous time. And, miracle of miracles, she found both the water bowl and the newspaper we had put down for her in the kitchen of this strange apartment. Many of you take your puppy prospects to kennel club meetings. But those pups are usually half grown. To prevent shyness, they have to get out when they're really young, two and three months old. In this case, if you find you do want to sell a puppy at five months of age, he will still make a good pet. But if you keep him home, or worse, in a kennel, he may make the transition poorly, acting shy and fearful, often for the balance of his days.

Shyness should not be the widespread problem it is. I have seen the sadness in breeders' eyes when their best prospect tucks his tail in the ring and no amount of loving praise or applause seems to make a difference. But the sadness in a pet owner's eyes is worse. Because in that case, the shy dog is the only one he's got. He won't sell it, cry and forget with another. He will keep it for its lifetime. Yet it will never be the dog he wished for, the one that, with a small investment of a breeder's time, he could have had.

The staff of the GAZETTE congratulates Carol Benjamin on sweeping the award field for 1985 - a "Fido" from Gaines Dog Care Center as Dog Writer of the Year, and a plaque from the Dog Writers' Association of America, for also being named Dog Writer of the Year. -Editors

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