



Behavior and Training Department Tips and Techniques

Pit Bull Terriers and Other Bully Breeds

There is a lot of prejudice – even hysteria - in the U.S. right now with regard to Pit Bull terriers and other dogs like them. Our shelters - especially in urban areas - are filled with Pit Bulls and Pit Bull mixes. Very few of them are adoptable, and even fewer are actually adopted. Those that are adopted are often the objects of fear and distrust.

There are several reasons for this, but the reasons are all controversial, and your belief depends a great deal on your point of view about behavior - whether it's caused by nature or nurture, and whether one can modify behavior that has already been in place through late adolescence or social maturity (between 1.5 and 2 years).

Many bully-type terriers were originally bred to fight other dogs, to bait bulls, or for other "blood" sports. Some breeders have been assiduous in breeding out the tendencies for aggression, but others actually breed for it - and the best way to get an aggressive dog is to breed two aggressive dogs to each other. The reasons for breeding aggression are varied - some people want their dogs to fight other dogs, some to guard their property, and some seem to want the "aura" of owning an aggressive dog.

Dogs bred as pets for several generations tend to lose the behavior patterns that are the most problematic. Unfortunately, they are still feared because of their looks, and because many - if not most - bully dogs still retain some of their undesirable behavior patterns.

Bully breeds have several desirable characteristics that build breed loyalty in their owners or guardians, such as:

- Extreme loyalty
- Affection to their owners
- Ease of training

Undesirable and/or anti-social behavior patterns include:

- The tendency to chase things that move (animals, people, etc.)
- The ability and tendency to bite and to hold on
- The tendency to try to dominate other animals or people by body slamming, mounting and otherwise physically controlling them.
- Uncontrollable arousal or excitement

The first two undesirable characteristics can be classified as "predatory." All dogs have some of this - some breeds more than others. But, in most breeds and breed types, the behaviors are inhibited. For instance, many dogs will chase runners or bicyclists, but they are unlikely to do anything if they catch up - and are easily trained out of the behavior. Truly predatory dogs go through a fairly set series of behaviors that can end in a serious bite or worse. These dogs are not angry or vicious. Instead, they are obeying an instinct that was essential for hunting. Thus, they are not likely to give any warning and the chase can be amazingly fast. Sometimes they stalk before they chase; other times they don't. A dog that bites out of fear or anger will virtually always warn its victim - it normally has no desire to bite, it just wants to be left alone.

Predatory attacks are very common in the bully breeds - predation is the main drive used in dog fighting, and it can be lethal.

The third undesirable characteristic of these breeds is "dominating" or "bully" behavior. This stems from confidence. Oftentimes, confident puppies will bully their siblings, and may take away resources (food or toys). They will do the same to members of their human families. And, if they're successful when they're puppies, they tend to repeat the behaviors when they're grown.



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The fourth undesirable characteristic - arousal or excitement - is actually the most problematic. Many bully dogs cannot seem to calm themselves down once they get excited. And once they get excited all their behaviors are exacerbated. Thus, if a dog is over-confident and has a tendency to body slam or mount, he or she will really crash into the other dog or person when he's aroused, sometimes inadvertently causing injury. He may begin to play-bite, and then bite harder and harder and harder. When you try to stop the behavior, the dog often becomes even more "aggressive." In this way, play can turn into aggression fairly quickly. Research on the brain has shown that excited play has exactly the same chemistry as extreme anger. This allows a play behavior to switch quickly into aggression. And, once the dog has become aggressive a few times, the switch is much easier.

Our test includes scenarios that allow each of these behaviors to be manifested if they are there. We do not just watch the animals, nor do we try to make them aggressive. What we do is try to anticipate and replicate behavior that occurs in a normal home.

We observe the dog for a substantial amount of time to see whether he is attentive or affectionate towards us. We then show the dog affection (petting), to see if he comes back for more. We then do something the dog is not likely to like but that will not hurt (examining the teeth and hugging). We give the dog objects or food and then ask for it back, or we drop something and then attempt to take it. And we play - we see if the dog retrieves and if he gives up play objects readily when he's excited. We also run around, much as a child would, to see if the dog chases and what he does when he catches up. We then wait to see how long it takes for the dog to calm down, to relax. Lastly, we introduce the dog to one or two other dogs, to see whether he is social to them.

We try to see the whole dog, as much as possible, for the safety and well being of our clients. We do not expect perfection, and will "grade" a dog for different levels of potential owners. There are some behaviors that are unacceptable - mostly aggression. If the dog is aggressive towards people in any way, he is not recommended for adoption. In addition, dog-to-dog aggression is a big mark against the dog as - especially in this county - people want their dogs to play with others.

Pit bulls and other bully breeds fail most often in the areas of arousal and dog-to-dog aggression.

Each and every dog is tested on his own merits. We have and do put pit bulls up for adoption, after a knowledgeable person has fostered him or her for three weeks. We are very cognizant of the power of this type of dog - plus many other big dogs - and would rather err on the side of caution than allow a possibly dangerous dog into our neighborhoods.

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