

BORDER COLLIES AND THE SOCIAL BRAIN

One of the greater mysteries about Border collies, as a breed, is why some of them can have such an easier passage through life, in terms of their ability to adapt to, and even flourish in, a whole range of different social contexts, and others may find them such a life-long challenge. It's a question, I am sure, many owners or canine professionals (like behaviourists, trainers, rescue centre staff or vets) may have asked themselves too, so I am going to explore the subject a bit further in this feature.

NURTURE – OR NATURE?

The commonest thing you might hear when any dog begins to struggle more with different social situations, or shows greater nervousness/aggression towards less familiar people or dogs, is that they haven't been properly or adequately 'socialised'. In other words, whatever went or goes wrong in a dog's social behaviour has to be down to what someone – including an owner – didn't get right in the dog's earlier rearing. Which is not only not always true, but also makes owners feel even worse about problems in their dogs' social attitudes or behaviour that are making them feel bad enough already.

What gets discussed or explored far less often are the genetic components that underlie so many social – and behavioural - issues in dogs, and collies in particular. In my view dogs will either be born with the capacity to have a 'higher functioning' social brain, or they won't. And by 'higher functioning' I mean a dog with an intrinsically more trusting nature, far less reactive or fearful in the face of newer or less familiar things, far more able to read the social cues of other dogs or people and be at ease in most social contexts or environments. So when you 'socialise' dogs like these, from a younger age, what you are really doing is just further enhancing and evolving a genetic potential that was already there.

DOGS WHO HAVE BIGGER STRUGGLES

Conversely, some dogs are not born with the same ability to cope more easily in social situations, and to me these tendencies can be spotted even in earliest puppyhood.

They may be more naturally fearful, nervous or distrusting of anything suddenly 'newer' or different in their environment. Or more socially reserved/alooof and less interested in different forms of social engagement with others. Or they may simply lack the ability to recognise the social language of others. They may be chiefly driven instead by more basic and primal instincts and urges, like the need to protect themselves and their most valuable resources in any social context, or control the behaviour of others.

And while good socialisation and training – and better social management by owners - can definitely help these dogs reach higher levels of social tolerance than they might otherwise have had, it cannot make them the same as dogs who were just born with more naturally 'sociable' brains, no matter how much owners may wish this were the case.

ACCEPTING THE LIMITS

Dogs with greater social difficulties, or issues, also bring us face to face with our own perhaps more 'hidden agenda' as owners, when it comes to what we may expect a more 'normal' dog's behaviour to be; i.e. outgoing, friendly with other people and dogs and more open to any new experience we throw their way in life. So when a dog cannot meet such expectations, we think

this failure reflects more on us, personally, or that we somehow own a more 'inferior' or 'problem' companion.

But dogs cannot know anything about these more hidden human expectations. They can only be what they can be, depending on how their brains are programmed to work. And sometimes you just have to accept the limits of what your dog can be, and also better learn to make the most of what you've got.

Similarly, people who not own dogs like these could perhaps be a little kinder and more understanding to those who do, and maybe not be so ready to judge or blame them for having a dog who just does not want to be 'more sociable'.

MAKING THE LESS NORMAL MORE NORMAL

Another thing that is very important to understand is that the kind of temperament or social outlook we have come to expect in pet dogs as 'standard' – again, as stated earlier, outgoing and friendly but also playful and owner-centred – is not really what dogs were originally designed to be beyond a certain age.

In our dogs' more ancient or wilder ancestors, for example, developing a far more aloof, independent and 'grown up' adult brain beyond puppyhood has always been far more the norm. And similarly possessing a social tolerance that only stretched to more immediate family or pack members. Beyond that, anything more 'other' or 'new' tended to be something potentially far more threatening to them.

Thus it is us who has most greatly shaped and changed the social nature of modern dogs through domestication and selective breeding; favouring dogs for centuries who did not seem to 'grow up' in the same way as these earlier dogs, or possess the primal instincts and urges – like greater social wariness, aggression or independence – that made them that much harder for us to own, train or control in other ways. Until eventually we came to make what was really LESS normal in dogs, in the past, more of the expected norm today.

BREEDING FOR THE 'RIGHT' SOCIAL BRAIN

Some of you might be familiar with the famous experiment undertaken by Russian geneticist Dmitri Belyaev decades ago, where it was proven that by more intense selective breeding you could turn formerly wild canids – in his case silver foxes, which he farmed – into far more biddable and social beings.

Belyaev noticed that despite being bred in captivity for 80 years, his silver foxes still mostly displayed behaviour like 'wild' animals – showing extreme nervousness or aggression around people, as well as high levels of stress, which made them far harder to handle. So through a ruthless selection programme, he decided to breed only from the 10% of his foxes who displayed 'tamer' behaviour, and cull the rest. Within 18 generations he had produced foxes who behaved far more like our modern pet dogs – barking, responding positively to people and even answering to their names when called.

The trouble with genes, or any specific genetic quirks, however, is that once they have become implanted deep into the whole basic DNA blueprint of any species – including canids - they never really go away, and may still emerge again, in later generations. Which includes the recurrence of dogs with more acute 'fear of the new' responses and lower social functioning and ability. We cannot always know how this happens, but what we DO know is that the more we

breed from dogs like these, or even lines featuring such dogs, the more common they are going to be.

Meanwhile far more on the social nature of Border collies, how to socialise these dogs most effectively from puppyhood, or deal with any later problems with their social behaviour that may arise appears in my BORDER COLLIES – A BREED APART trilogy of books.

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