

Ten Rules to Protect your Neighbors from Fido

By Barney Kendrick, VOP Resident

The First (and probably most important) Rule

Dogs have been bred for specific roles. It is far easier to train a puppy or adult dog for a role it is genetically predisposed towards. If a dog is forced into a role it has no inclination for then there is a significant risk of reversion to instinctive behavior patterns, especially when under stress. **Therefore, “Select an appropriate breed” is the first Rule.** “Appropriate” means likely to fit in with your family, the neighborhood you live in, and the job you expect it to perform. Too many people are charmed by a puppy or a friendly “rescued” dog. All puppies are cute, but it's what they grow up to be that you and your neighbors must live with. Be hard-nosed and investigate the breed and that particular puppy's breeding before falling in love with it. Talk with a professional breeder who shows or competes in obedience, hunting, or coursing trials with his dogs before you commit, else you may find yourself stuck for the next decade with the wrong dog.

Breed is not a guarantee of temperament. However, it is a reasonably reliable predictor. Every breed has a unique combination of traits, and some will be desirable to you while some are not. Mutts (more than two breeds mixed) can have some very favorable traits and random, but often fewer, undesirable ones than many purebred dogs. Cross-breeds (two breeds mixed) tend to have a random mixture of both parents' strengths and weaknesses. A professional breeder, after years of experience with a particular breed, is much more likely than you are to select that special puppy in a litter best suited to your needs, so don't be bashful about explaining those needs. A rescue society volunteer who has kept a dog in his or her home for at least a month can intuit a great deal about a particular dog's personality, especially if the volunteer only works with one breed.

A carefully bred puppy costs significantly more than one advertised in the local paper or an ad circular, but it will be worth every cent of the difference. If you can't afford a show quality dog then ask for a good, non-breeding family dog. In “breeder talk” this means a well bred puppy with flawed coat colors or slight imperfections in proportions, teeth, or skull shape, but representative of the breed personality and perhaps more intelligent than average. For your part, you are volunteering to spay or neuter the dog so it cannot breed. A spayed or neutered dog cannot be AKC registered, but since you are not going to show or breed it then you shouldn't care.

A good breeder is entitled to be nose-y about potential owners of his or her puppies because they love every puppy and care deeply about the breed's reputation. They want to see both you and the puppy happy, so they would prefer to keep a puppy rather than see it returned months later with a ruined personality (Reputable breeders and rescue groups almost always insist that you sign a contract to return the animal to them if it doesn't work out.). A reputable breeder will direct you towards other breeds if he feels his is incompatible with your personality or needs. Breeders are experts on their chosen breed or breeds, so take the expert's advice when she tells you that a family home in a Florida neighborhood is unsuitable for Bernese Mountain Dogs.

A Second Rule

The second Rule is simple: train your dog. The Jacksonville Humane Society, the Parks and Recreation Department, and the local dog obedience club all offer group classes at quite reasonable prices. Once you've established reliable communication with your dog then your life will become far easier. Sure, it takes some time and effort to do it right, but you will see amazing improvement in your

dog's behavior. The classes also teach owners to be consistent when interacting with their dog since dogs have difficulty recognizing inconsistently-worded commands.

That Overlooked Third Rule

Condition your dog to being around small children, the elderly, strangers, and other dogs both on and off-lead before it is large enough to do them serious harm. A dog is a social animal and will usually adapt to your home environment without much more than the training needed to housebreak it. Problems arise when that same dog finds itself in a social situation it doesn't have any experience with. Social conditioning needs to be done during the first year of a dog's life to be most effective, but with patience you can condition older dogs. You want the dog confident enough to explore and adapt to new situations peacefully. Introduce new situations slowly, one feature at a time, and make certain the dog is comfortable in a particular situation before adding a new complication. A timid dog is as likely to bite (it's called fear biting) as a dominant dog. Both timid and dominant dogs that are poorly socialized are prone to aggressive behavior in stressful situations. Poorly socialized dogs are frequently aggressive with young children, strangers, and other dogs.

Offenses Against the Fourth Rule involve Halfway Measures

The fourth Rule is to get a solidly built fence with self-closing mechanisms and automatically locking gate latches if you are going to leave a dog in the yard unattended for longer than two seconds. Plant shrubs that have dense root systems along the entire fence line and pour concrete or lay closely spaced pavers beneath and inside gates to make digging out difficult. Don't leave room for your dog to get behind defensive shrubbery unless it has lots of shallow, tough roots that extend under the fence. Unfortunately, cedar fences by themselves can only delay a determined dog. Thorns or spikey Holly leaves are usually sufficient to discourage board-busters and fence-chewers. A thick network of roots will discourage even the most proficient diggers (some turfs are thick enough, but beware of thinning due to disease or insects). Once a dog has escaped then it will be doubly hard to contain in the future, so it is better to take preemptive action.

The Fifth Rule Concerns Etiquette

Give people approaching you a friendly warning if your dog overreacts while on a lead or is suspicious of children. Many dogs become highly defensive simply because their option to run away from a threatening situation has been removed. A dog that wouldn't pose any danger to adults, young children, or other dogs when running loose in its yard may bite when restrained by a lead or tie-down. Conversely, some dogs that behave while you are on the other end of the lead prove aggressive when running loose. Warn others about any personality flaws before they walk too close to your dog or try to pet it. Warn neighbors if it is unsafe for them to attempt to put a lead on your dog to bring it back to you.

The Sixth Rule Admonishes Honest Evaluation

Is your dog socially well adjusted and responsive to commands? Let your dog know how you expect it to behave through regular training sessions. **Does your dog respond promptly to your commands even in a novel situation, or does it resist?** (Delay is a form of subtle resistance.) It's a serious flaw in your dog's personality and training if you have to physically restrain your dog to keep it from attacking after telling it that a visitor or delivery person is "OK". If you have to use a shock collar or scream to control your dog, either get rid of the dog immediately or turn it over to a professional trainer today.

Ideally, a dog should bark a warning when someone comes to the front door, fence gate, or an open garage door, but back off and remain silent once you say "It's OK" (or whatever command you trained

the dog with). The dog should never attack unless you are attacked first, and it should break off any counter-attack as soon as you command it to. You will need a professional trainer to work with you and your dog to establish this degree of control. If you own a Pit Bull, Canary Presario, Rottweiler, Doberman, American Bulldog, Boxer, Giant Schnauzer, German Sheppard, or another large breed then pay for a good trainer and rest better knowing you can control your dog in any situation.

The Seventh Rule Addresses Avoidable Misfortune

While this might appear to be simply common sense, ignoring this rule precipitates an unfortunate number of infant and toddler deaths every year. **Never leave any dog, regardless of disposition or history, alone with an infant, toddler, or anyone else not strong enough to push the dog away.** This rule must be adhered to absolutely, meaning don't do it even if the child is in a crib or playpen. Should an attacked child be fortunate enough to escape fatal injury or permanent disfigurement, it will still be forever terrified of dogs.

The Eighth Rule Should Be Fun

Love your dog and play with it frequently. Set aside some time every day to groom, pet, snuggle up with, and talk calmly to your dog. Dogs need daily reassurance that they are still in good standing with the boss, especially during periods of training. A secure, well trained, and socially conditioned dog is far less likely to be overwhelmed by a novel situation and bite someone.

The Crucial Ninth Rule

Do not encourage aggressive behavior by your dog. Never incite a dog to violence or extreme excitement. Some people feel more secure with an aggressive dog in the house. What they don't realize is that a confident dog will defend those it loves without any need for priming. Some people like to take out their own aggression on the dog in the guise of play. Both behaviors endanger one's neighbors because a rough, aggressive dog (or a timid and overstressed dog) will bite when it ends up in their yards with their kids, which it will manage to do sooner or later. When the dog does get loose, will it behave in a friendly fashion or go on a rampage?

The Tenth Rule Requires Dispassionate Reflection

Ask yourself if you'd enjoy living next door to your dog. Ask your neighbors if they're comfortable with your dog. If a dog barks and growls aggressively, fights with other dogs, and threatens visitors then it poses a serious threat to others. If you own several dogs that might escape together then their instinct for hunting as a pack makes them many times more dangerous than each dog would be by itself. A single dog usually takes only small prey while a pack of three or four medium-sized dogs can tackle prey as large as a deer or cow. If the people living near you aren't comfortable with your dog(s) then consider it a warning to take action before your dog(s) commit an atrocity against a child or a dog being walked. It is far better to put an aggressive dog down than to risk a child's life.

Additional Information

The Right Dog For You by Daniel F. Tortora, Ph.D. (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1980, 381 pages) A good introduction to the different breeds, 123 of which are listed individually with indications of each breed's range of temperament and a short description of behavioral strengths and weaknesses. This book is a reliable source of information. Read the "Breed, Behavior, and temperament" chapter to learn how to interpret the behavior tables for each breed. Breeds are described individually in chapters 2-7 with each chapter dedicated to one AKC group. Chapter 8 gives guidelines for selecting a breed that

suits your family. Chapter 9, "Each Dog is an Individual" is an outstanding "level-set" for those considering a new puppy or an older purebred dog. \$12.75 from Amazon.com

HELP! This Animal is Driving Me Crazy: Solutions to your Dog's Behavior Problems, also by Daniel F. Tortora, Ph.D. If you can't afford a trainer or even obedience school then at least use this volume as a guide. Most people fail to communicate clearly with a misbehaving dog, so the dog knows you're angry, but it's uncertain of just why you blew up. Learn a little "dog language" because that's easier than teaching a dog yours. Under \$10. used from Amazon associated bookstores (Start in Amazon.com)

Jacksonville K-9 Obedience Club on Powers Ave. near Old St. Augustine Rd. Home page: <http://www.k9obedienceclub.org> We went through a basic group obedience course with them. Nice, roomy, roofed facility with a concrete floor but without walls, so wear insect repellent in warm weather. Parking can get a little crowded if two or three classes are meeting at the same time, so be cautious when turning into the parking lot. Friendly, experienced instructors who gave us lots of tips.