

Back to Basics Presents Not Just Child's Play: Tom Lams shares his thoughts on the relationship

By Laura Post

"I want to get a puppy for my child. When will you have a litter for sale?"

This question can strike fear in a breeder's heart. Which is ironic because I haven't met a trainer/breeder yet who didn't grow up loving a dog or pet of some sort. A major factor behind breeders' concerns is the fact that, yearly, a large number of tragedies occur where a dog has seriously injured a child. An understanding of the nature of dogs versus children is greatly advantageous to developing an fulfilling relationship between a family and their pet.

Renowned animal behaviorists/communicators, Tom and Kay Lams, will soon visit LSATC, and recently, Tom shared some of his insights into the world of dogs and children with me. (It might surprise folks to know that along with their lifelong study of animal behavior, the Lams' raised seven children.)

Dogs view children as being lower in the pecking order than adults. Why do you think that is?

Kids are often hyper and don't concentrate on one thing. They make sudden, erratic moves that dogs don't understand or often see as prey-type behavior. One thing we work on during seminars with children and dogs is to make the children more aware and sensitive to what the dog is feeling.

Another thing is that children, being shorter, are often on the same eye level as the dog and will stare at the dog, whereas adults tend to look at the dog and then look away. Dogs see staring as threatening behavior. And sometimes children stare because they are afraid. A dog's instinct is to dominate and if it senses fear, it will want to react.

Should parents wait until their child is a certain age before getting a dog?

I have seen success with children being raised with a puppy and then with older kids with a dog. Both situations can work. However, one of the hardest times for the dog can be when a child starts school. The child will suddenly not have time or as much time with the dog as before and the dog can suffer from lack of attention. I know of one situation where a family dog leaves the house at 3:00 PM every day, like clockwork, to walk to the bus stop and wait for the child to come home. The dog never mistakes the time. So dogs prefer routine. I have one dog that eats at 4 PM every day. If I'm late in feeding him, he brings me his bowl.

I have heard it said that a mature dog's intelligence is equivalent to that of a five-year old child. Would you agree with this?

Not always. I had a dog where I never did know his limits. There wasn't a thing I couldn't teach him. And every dog is different, some are smarter than others. Some are smarter than a lot of people.

Are there breeds of dogs that you wouldn't recommend for children?

I would not recommend Dalmatians. More Dalmatians bite children than any other breed. Of course, I am mostly speaking of "backyard-bred dogs here" where attention to breeding for temperament and health is ignored. A dog in pain from hip dysplasia, for example, can be testy, especially around children, because it doesn't feel good. Other breeds I don't recommend for children are Basenjis, Akitas, Rhodesian Ridgebacks and Rottweilers.

Breeds I recommend are the King Charles Cavaliers, they are wonderful dogs with kids. Also Shelties, and the Australian Shepherd, but only with an active family, these dogs need exercise, and Whippets. Whippets are fantastic house dogs. Calm in the house and very loyal. You'll never go to the bathroom alone though if you own a whippet, they'll follow you everywhere.

What about Airedales with children?

Airedales are not for everyone, and for families with children, it would depend on the temperament of Airedale, calmer Airedales would be better. Some Airedales do not like quick movements and some don't forgive easily. I find Airedales tend to be one- to two-person dogs. The children would need very good dog manners and would need to have a good understanding of how a dog feels.

Also, parents need to communicate to the dog that the kids are first and the dogs are last in the pecking order.

Airedales will often rule a household if the owners are not careful, why do you think that occurs?

Airedales are extremely intelligent and too smart to put up with a lot of baloney. You have to ask for what you are wanting, they just won't up and give it to you. They are also very intuitive and will take advantage of people if the owners aren't careful. In this way, the Airedale can be too smart, smarter than their owners sometimes. And it's best to guide rather than force the

Airedale into doing what you want. Negotiation, that is really what it's about, and with most dogs, not just Airedales.

Poodles are another breed that can be smarter than a lot of people and will take over a household if the owner isn't careful. I would place Dobermans in that category as well.

The things I have learned from attending your seminars have greatly influenced how I interact with both dogs and people. Your understanding of animal behavior and communication, and your ability to teach this to people is extraordinary.

I can't say that I've learned it all. Or that there is one perfect way. I am constantly making adjustments to what I teach through what I learn. And working with dogs is a constant learning process. The dogs have taught me a lot. We just need to listen. And approach things with an open mind. If you don't do that, you will miss something, and often, the dog will teach you more than you teach it.