

Four things puppy buyers need to know about health, disability and racism in the world of purebred dog breeding

At **Who's Ya Doggy?** we are often asked what we think about the debate raging around the issue of poor health in pedigree dogs. This article answers that question.

We adore dogs and delight in their variations. Breeds are interesting and lots of fun. They offer some predictability, which is of great value when choosing a pet who will be your companion for 12, 15 or even 18 years.

However, we are not purists. There is no question that pedigree dogs suffer from many health issues that have a genetic basis. We consider this to be a critical issue to be addressed.

Crossbreeds and mixed breeds (affectionately, “mutts”) often suffer from fewer of these problems, and make fine pets and working dogs.

Narrow gene pools and in-breeding

All dogs have the same ancestral foundation - the Wolf. However, pedigree dogs have been bred very selectively over time, to create a very particular look and sometimes certain behaviours. They are true *designer dogs*, with specifications for how they must look that are both very precise and very extensive.

The consequence of this has been a tendency to breed far closer relatives than we would consider appropriate for any other animal - or for ourselves - in order to bed down particular features. This causes a loss of genetic variability, with the natural evolutionary consequence of weakened immune systems and other physiological faults.

Of course, a truly responsible breeder would never breed from two very closely related dogs. Unfortunately, because most modern pedigree dogs come from extremely narrow gene pools and are by definition closely related, it follows that most pedigree breeders do not qualify as “responsible”. Even those who don't line breed.

Perhaps that's a little harsh, but you catch my drift. And note that I said “most”. Some dog breeds have a much broader genetic foundation than others, such as [Blue Heelers](#)[†], and a small number of breeders go to a great deal of trouble to mix things up genetically.

Genetic testing

Paradoxically, testing of rare pedigree dogs for genetic faults before breeding from them actually serves to intensify their genetic problems over time. By excluding more and

more dogs from an already tiny available breeding pool, genetic variability is further diminished. New and more impactful health problems emerge at an increasing rate as this genetic base shrinks toward its inevitable end. Though very well-intentioned, testing actually speeds the demise of a breed.

The ultimate “responsible” breeders are, of course, those who have the courage to step away from their preferred gene pool and, with their dogs' welfare in mind, outcross to other breeds or to mixed breed dogs to inject fresh genes. In fact, the most dedicated and responsible breeders have *already* started outcrossing to save their breeds.

Doggy racism, eugenics and outcrossing

The popular misunderstanding is that mixing or outcrossing somehow *contaminates* a breed, as if there really were such a thing as a *pure*-breed. Of course, there isn't. A breed can be defined once there are sufficient generations of similar looking dogs to stabilise their 'look'. Yet many breeders seem to be oddly unaware of how their breed came to be, apparently imagining it was birthed by God onto the surface of the earth, as is. Sire Adam and dam Eve.

The reality is that all breeds have either wild or mongrel origins, or were designed by humans. And many of them quite recently.

Who's Ya Doggy's [Dog Breed Guide](#)[†] describes this heritage for each breed. For example, these handsome mutts....um, purebreds: [Golden Retriever](#), [Doberman](#), [Northern Inuit](#), [Leonberger](#), [Rhodesian Ridgeback](#), [Catahoula Leopard Dog](#)[†].

Contained breeding is also how people from Iceland tend to have a certain 'look'. So do Koreans, Spaniards, Greeks and Chinese. But if a Spaniard marries a Chinese person we don't recoil at the ‘contamination’ of their children's Spanishness or Chineseness. We are more likely to admire how good looking they are, and find this mixed heritage interesting and enriching.

Well, perhaps there are still some of those people around who consider this “hybridisation” an affront to the principles of racial purity. You know, eugenics 'n all. Not really in vogue, but a few proponents can still be spotted from time to time, often with show ribbons pinned to their puffier-than-thou chests.

Despite these objections, some breeders started outcrossing a while ago, going to a lot of trouble to improve the welfare and sustainability of their breeds. For example, [Boxers](#)[†] have been out-crossed to genetically short-tailed [Corgis](#)[†] to create a Boxer with a naturally short tail, removing any need for docking. To see one of these Boxers you'd never know it took a detour via Corgi just a short while ago. [Red Setters](#)[†] and [Irish Red and White Setters](#)[†] have been crossed to add essential genetic variability to the latter, which would otherwise have died out. To look at the animals, you'd never know. More than a dozen dog-generations ago one line of [Dalmatians](#)[†] was

outcrossed to a [Pointer](#)[†], to resolve the breed's painful and dangerous genetic problem with uric acid metabolism. And you guessed it, *you'd never know*.

A 'breed' is nothing more than a set of design specifications. It has no deeper truth than that. One breed is not a poison that contaminates another, nor is it meaningfully different. It's just another bundle of Wolf genes.

Extreme traits and intentional breeding of disabled animals

The second reason that crossbreeds are often better off health-wise, is that the breed standards for a few pedigree dogs are written in such a way as to reward extreme traits in the show ring. Perhaps understandably, whoever originally penned them may not have anticipated that they would be abused in this way - to drive and justify the intentional breeding of physical deformities.

For example, many [Neapolitan Mastiffs](#)[†] have such a massive weight of excess skin on their faces that their eye skin is stretched down and the inner mucous membrane is exposed - a condition called *Ectropion*. As you can imagine, this is very unpleasant for the dog to live with. Some can barely see, because their upper lids are pulled down over their eyes. Some Neos also have such soft hocks and pasterns that they cannot walk normally. *This is not responsible breeding.*

The beloved [Pug](#)[†], as well as [Bulldogs](#)[†], have become such extreme barrels that they cannot bend to clean themselves. Their heads are so large that many cannot be birthed naturally. Their jaws are so artificially shortened that their teeth crowd and don't line up with each other, and the animals can't breathe freely. A dog is not supposed to snore heavily or frequently. It's not supposed to be breathless and overheat with minor exertion. *This is not responsible breeding.*

In some countries the [Cavalier King Charles Spaniel](#)[†], a delightful little dog that should make a great pet, has become so plagued with *Syringomyelia*, a very painful and distressing condition, that the breed is verging on extinction. *This is not responsible breeding.*

Even the strongest, most athletic dogs have not escaped this abuse. Many lines of [German Shepherd Dogs](#)[†] now have such diminutive, excessively sloped hind quarters, that they have lost the strength to properly propel themselves. They are a far cry from their noble and powerful ancestors of just 30 years ago, who could launch themselves over 2.5m (8ft) walls with aplomb. *This is not responsible breeding.*

By comparison, Joe down the street whose [Husky](#)[†] accidentally breeds with Sally's [Australian Shepherd](#)[†], who then have beautiful puppies that are found nice homes and raised with love, is more "responsible". These genetically diverse, well-structured animals have a much better chance of happy, healthy, long lives than the animals described above.

Breeding dogs with disabilities *on purpose* is a perversion of morality. It's an utter failure of empathy. To intentionally or knowingly breed animals that are likely to suffer, and to cause pain to the families who love them, is criminal.

So what can be done to contain this callous behaviour?

Breed standards and rewarded behaviour

"Benjie, sit! Good boy!" Give a liver treat and rub head affectionately = reward >> behaviour repeats.

"Dog show lady, mate this bitch with her grandfather to ensure extra short legs and a super-squashed face! Good lady!" Give a ribbon and praise = reward >> behaviour repeats.

Of all people, dog people are the ones who should be most acutely aware that rewarded behaviour will be repeated. So we need to change what is being rewarded. Everything else can stay *exactly the same*.

How so? Well, a mind that follows rules, seeking simple rewards, is in fact a mind that's very easy to change. Not by persuasion, rationality or appeals to basic empathy, but by changing the rules that generate the rewards. *Require* moderate, aesthetic, functional features in show dogs. *Punish* extreme features. *Punish* poor function. *Require* a minimum calculated genetic spread, with no points lost for out-crossing. *Reward* high genetic variability (= low coefficient of inbreeding, or COI) with ribbons and praise.

In fact, I predict that **specialised outcrossing could easily become the next big thing in pedigree dog breeding**. This whole conversation may fade quickly from memory. Apart from being *necessary* to save many breeds, outcrossing is an admirable skill. It takes breeding know-how, dedication and patience. It also brings with it all kinds of inspiring new opportunities to produce truly stunning, superior show dogs. Think of all the ribbons that could be earned this way.

Critically, new breed standards must be written in very literal terms, making misinterpretation impossible. So not that a dog should have *"short legs"*, which risks misinterpretation as *"Shorter is better, until their penises are knocking against pebbles on the ground and they can't scratch their own elbows"*, but that legs should be *"No longer than X and no shorter than Y"*. Spell it out.

If a few ignorant people complain loudly about all this, *bad luck*. Preventing the suffering of so many living beings is much more important than the temporary discomfort of listening to these people bleat.

Animal welfare groups and legislators should really muscle in on this. Don't ban pedigree dogs or showing. Just help show breeders to ensure the continuation of the

hobby and breeds they love, instead of in-breeding their dogs into extinction or distorting them into debility in exchange for a few final ribbons.

† You will need *Microsoft Silverlight* installed on your PC in order to view the [Dog Breed Guide](#).

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