

Pedigree dogs are becoming stupid as we breed them for looks, not brains

Pedigree dogs have become increasingly stupid as they are now bred for their looks, not their brains, according to new research.



Experts are set to recommend that dogs not be awarded the "best in show" title unless they are certified free from genetic diseases Photo: DAVID BURGESS

By Lucy Cockcroft

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Their mental and physical agility of many breeds is being eroded as owners now look for docile, pretty pets to live in their homes. In the 19th century dogs were more likely to be selected for their strength and skills, so they were able to earn their keep guarding homes and livestock and fetching the quarry on a hunting trip. But a significant change in breeding trends has meant the ancestors of these proud working dogs are now less responsive to commands and not as alert or attentive.

Scientists in Sweden have found strong evidence that breeding for appearance has led to a decline in intelligence.

Report author Kenth Svartberg, an ethologist from Stockholm University, said the changes had happened over the course of just a few generations.

"Modern breeding practices are affecting the behaviour and mental abilities of pedigree breeds as well as their physical features," he said.

Dogs are now selected for breeding because they have the silkiest coat rather than the keenest sense of smell or quickest reactions. Concentrating on these outward aspects has been dictated by the requirements set by dog shows, and the needs of modern pet owners.

The trend is reflected in the popularity of so-called "handbag dogs", like chihuahuas and papillons, that appear to be used as fashion accessories.

Celebrities such as Paris Hilton, Britney Spears and even actor Mickey Rourke are frequently photographed carrying the small creatures around with them.

Dr Svartberg tested 13,000 dogs on characteristics such as sociability and curiosity to help him rate 31 different breeds.

He found that those bred for appearance, and especially for shows, displayed reduced levels of all these qualities. He also found that attractive appearance was often linked with introversion and a boring personality.

Dr Svartberg said: "Perhaps the genes behind attractive looks could also be closely linked to those that cause fearfulness."

The worst affected working breeds were smooth collies, once a herding dog, and Rhodesian ridgebacks, which were used for hunting even dangerous game.