

Puppy-farmed dogs show worse behaviour, suffer ill health and die young – so adopt, don't shop

September 4 2017, by Catherine Douglas



Adopt a dog - irresponsible breeders will create more dogs that will suffer from lack care in their early months. Credit: AlexasFotos

There are an estimated [8.5m dogs in Britain](#), and demand means that unscrupulous people are happy to breed and sell dogs at a profit with scant thought for their welfare. The RSPCA estimate that up to 1.9m puppies are sold each year in the UK, yet according to the Battersea Dogs and Cats Home report [only 12% are from licensed breeders](#).

The large illegal trade in puppies [exposed by a recent Panorama documentary](#) costs millions in undeclared taxable income (three-quarters of buyers [pay in cash](#) – one dealing gang from Manchester was making [£35,000 a week](#)), while evidence shows puppies from puppy farms suffer [poor health and early death](#).

It is tragic that there are around [40,000 dogs unclaimed in rescue shelters every year](#). Although research evidence varies, our research on Staffordshire bull terriers, an over represented breed in rescue shelters, presented at the British Society of Animal Science last year showed that there is [no difference in the behaviour of rescue dogs compared to dogs bought as puppies from breeders](#). Given the frequently high cost of buying a puppy and the number of animals in shelters awaiting the chance of a new home, it's clear dog lovers should consider [adopting, not shopping](#).

Research from the US, Italy and from [our own team at Newcastle University](#) using surveys of dog owners, suggests that less responsibly bred dogs – including puppy-farmed dogs and those from pet shops – are more likely to be aggressive towards their owners and strangers. They were also more fearful of strangers and other dogs – and more likely to suffer separation anxiety as adults than dogs from reputable breeders that follow standards. Other behaviour include poorer trainability and house soiling. While these differences are less than ideal, the welfare of a dog that is frightened or in a position where it has learned to show aggression will suffer. If it attacks people it may even be put down.

However, it seems would-be dog-owners are listening to the advice pushed by the RSPCA and [television vet Marc Abraham](#), who advocate that all prospective owners should see the puppies interacting with the mother, preferably more than once. If you don't see mother and pups together it's a warning sign of an irresponsible breeder. Our most recent, forthcoming, research focused on border collies, cocker spaniels and labradors reveals that almost 90% of survey respondents say they saw the mother of their puppy. This either reflects that the "where's mum?" message is getting through, that our respondents were clued-up, or that irresponsible breeders and dealers are getting craftier in duping the public to safeguard their profits.

Do your research

What's worrying from our surveys is that puppy buyers are still not doing their research. Around 13% of our respondents had made no effort to research buying their puppy and only 23% had checked the reputation of the breeder, such as by making several visits to see for themselves. Dogs bought by owners from breeders who they had taken the time to check out reported their dogs were better behaved, less likely to be aggressive towards other dogs, strangers, or exhibit general fear. And while it is used only around one-third of cases, it's become apparent that where the RSPCA and Animal Welfare Fund's "[puppy contract](#)" is used, these pups grew into dogs that showed the least of all the above aggressive and fear-related behaviours.

Among our respondents, 73% thought their breeder was responsible – but we rated only 10% of them as responsible, judged on factors such as whether the puppy was reared in the owner's home, the mother was seen and they used the RSPCA and AWF puppy contract. The contract isn't legally bamboozling – it's an [easy-to-read checklist for the breeder to complete](#) and it has guidance for buyers as to what they should expect to hear – so buyers should ask for it.

Changes in licensing are coming which will require anyone breeding and selling dogs as a business or anyone producing three or more litters in a 12-month period will require a licence. While 80% of our respondents supported this, 92% thought that all litters should be licensed – and existing breeders were even more strongly in favour. It's interesting that in France it is now [compulsory for breeders to display tax details with all adverts](#) for dogs and cats for sale.

Socialisation vital in early life

Traditionally the sensitive "[socialisation](#)" period in a dog's life is considered to be between around three to 12 weeks. This is when puppies should be gradually, safely and positively introduced to a range of people, animals, environments and sounds to ensure well-balanced responses to the world in future. But researchers in the US found that it is during this period that [puppies bred at puppy farms spend the most time confined without social interaction](#) or appropriate sensory input. Responsible breeders will care for the dogs in a home environment and interact positively with them during this time. Responsible breeders will also breed for good temperament.

This may in part account for some of the behavioural differences between [dogs](#) from responsible and less responsible [breeders](#) in the research. But there is growing evidence to suggest that puppies may also be affected at earlier stages of development, akin to research in humans.

For example, stress on the mother during pregnancy and deficiencies in maternal care (which can be brought on by stress) have long-term effects on offspring stress response, learning and memory. While the effects of early life adversity are well established in humans, research is now showing similar effects in other species, for example, [dogs](#) and [pigs](#). Conditions in many puppy farms are [harmful to the mental health and welfare of the breeding dogs](#) – so it's quite plausible that stressed bitches

are producing anxious, fear-prone puppies.

There may be other mechanisms at work which we don't fully understand, but this strengthens the case for ensuring that breeding bitches are placed in good home environments which promote the best welfare for them and our future canine companions.

Research or rescue

Tony Robinson, renowned as Baldrick in the Blackadder comedy series for his "[cunning plans](#)", is judging at [Pup Aid](#), a charity event campaigning to stop puppy farming. If you are ready to give a dog a home, the most cunning plan is to do your [research](#). If you are sure that it must be a puppy from a breeder rather than a rescue dog, then [research your breed](#) and the [health issues that affect it](#) – then [research your breeder](#) and ask for a [puppy contract to be filled out](#).

And if you feel there is something wrong, for the sake of the puppy and its parents' sake, [report it](#).

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