

AP-Petside poll: Training, not nature, makes bully

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LOS ANGELES -- The majority of American pet owners believe a well-trained dog is safe - even if it comes from one of the "bully breeds."

Some dog breeds, such as pit bulls or Rottweilers, are considered truly dangerous by 28 percent of American pet owners, but an Associated Press-Petside.com poll found that 71 percent said any breed can be safe if the dogs are well trained.

"It's not the dog. It's the owner that's the problem," said Michael Hansen, a 59-year-old goldsmith from Port Orchard, Wash. "The dog will do whatever it can to please the owner, right down to killing another animal for you."

"If they are brought up in a loving household, they can flourish just like any other dog," agreed Nancy Lyman, 56, of Warwick, Mass.

Sixty percent of pet owners feel that all dog breeds should be allowed in residential communities, while 38 percent believe some breeds should be banned, according to the poll conducted by GfK Roper Public Affairs and Corporate Communications.

Denver and Miami-Dade County in Florida have pit bull bans that go back decades. The Army and Marine Corps have put base housing off limits to the dogs in the last few years.

Of the pet owners in the poll who support breed bans, 85 percent would bar pit bulls. Other breeds considered too dangerous were Rottweilers, Dobermans, German shepherds and chow chows. Seven percent said any violent, vicious or fighting dog should be banned and 2 percent said all large dogs should be outlawed.

Asked specifically about pit bulls, 53 percent of those polled said they were safe for residential neighborhoods, but 43 percent said they were too dangerous.

Age played a major role in the pit bull questions - 76 percent of those under age 30 said pit bulls were safe, compared with just 37 percent of seniors.

Janice Dudley, 81, of Culver City, Calif., was taking out her garbage when she was charged by a pit bull whose owner had been walking him in her neighborhood for years.

"He came within a few inches of my leg. It was shocking. There was nothing I could do. The owner controlled the dog and they went on their way but it was really very frightening," she said.

She goes to great lengths to avoid the man and dog now, she said. "That was as close as I've ever come and as close as I ever want to be."

Dudley would stop short of imposing a widespread breed ban, but she believes pit bulls are too dangerous. "I think it is in their nature to be more vicious than other dogs," she said.

She blames breeders for the dangerous behavior of the animals and believes the dogs are genetically at risk. "People I know who have had them maintain they are the sweetest things in the world. I don't believe it," she said.

Older pet owners were more apt to support a breed ban than younger ones - 56 percent of seniors believe some dogs should be outlawed compared with just 22 percent of those under age 30.

Parents who own pets were no more or less likely than non-parents to say certain breeds should be banned.

But Tiffany Everhart, 40, of Splendora, Texas, wouldn't have a pit bull. "I have a small child and I'm not going to take that chance." A paralegal, she also believes some dogs are too dangerous for residential areas and she would support a breed ban.

"Every dog is different and should be evaluated on its own merits," said "Dog Whisperer" Cesar Millan.

"If a pit bull has good energy, and if he is socialized early and brought up in a balanced and structured pack environment, then I would consider him perfectly safe for a family with children," Millan said.

Lyman, who has a 17-year-old, blind, deaf and crippled Shih Tzu, said any dog will bite if provoked - citing Martha Stewart's recent run-in with her own dog.

Hansen blames the pit bull's bad reputation on owners and the press.

"You have a tendency to sensationalize stories or put into them right down to the blood and gore when it isn't really necessary," said Hansen, who has two dogs, 9-year-old Lab-collie brothers named Chaz and Zach.

Still, she said Michael Vick's dogfighting operation probably helped pit bulls' bad rep because it showed that "people can reintroduce these dogs back into a society that's not going to abuse them."

"The owner is responsible for what an animal does. It's totally your behavior, whether you have a good dog that minds well and is not a problem to society or you turn it into a vicious animal that will bite the mailman, the girl next door or grandma walking down the street," Hansen said.

Betsy Adevai, 50, of Grand Rapids, Mich., said muscle dogs have become status symbols for young men who walk through her inner city neighborhood.

"You don't see people walking cockapoos or fluffy puppies. I have five boys and they all have friends around here. They walk these dogs to say, 'I'm cool,' 'I'm a badass because I got this dog,'" she said.

She thinks pit bulls "look like little football players" so she wouldn't have one, but the custom seamstress doesn't blame the dogs.

"It's the attitude behind the people who raise them, not the dog," she said.

The AP-Petside.com Poll was conducted Oct. 13-20, 2010, by GfK Roper Public Affairs and Corporate Communications. It involved landline and cell phone interviews with 1,000 pet owners nationwide, and has a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 4.0 percentage points.