

Raising an Australian Shepherd: Temperament and Development

Lisa Giroux, Western Newfoundland, Canada, 709-955-2011 lisa@k9station.com

When raising an Aussie, it's wise to understand general breed character and to design the rearing program with the individual dog in mind. Awareness of the general (and sometimes drastic) temperamental changes that Australian Shepherds exhibit as they mature can aid owners in training and socialization.

CHARACTER ([Australian Shepherd Club of America Breed Standard](#))

: The Australian Shepherd is intelligent, primarily a working dog of strong herding and guardian instincts. He is an exceptional companion. He is versatile and easily trained, performing his assigned tasks with great style and enthusiasm. He is reserved with strangers but does not exhibit shyness. Although an aggressive, authoritative worker, viciousness toward people or animals is intolerable.

"...intelligent..."

This word accurately describes most Aussies, but what does it really mean? Aussies are intelligent and learn basic obedience commands extremely quickly, but this is only part of how Aussie intelligence works.

Aussies are problem-solvers and are renowned for their ability to think independently and make decisions on their own. Aussies do not see "limits" in their environment...only opportunities. This is a necessary trait in Aussie working ability with stock and it carries over to other areas of life. Aussie owners should thoughtfully teach limits, before the Aussie takes the opportunities!

For example, fences. Other dogs see fences as insurmountable obstacle. A Lab looks at a fence and thinks, "Darn, a fence. Guess I'll be staying in the yard." The Aussie looks at a fence and thinks, "hmm, I can get over that" and then proceeds to try 90 different ways to do so. Aussie owners are often shocked at their dog's ability to escape. Many Aussies die each year after they escape an enclosure that seems secure. Is this because of phenomenal jumping ability and athleticism? Partly, but the biggest reason for this often-seen trait is that the Aussie doesn't see the fence in the same way as other breeds. If there is a problem in the way of an Aussie (such as how to get over a fence to see something interesting) the Aussie will usually quickly figure out how to solve the problem.

Another example: if an Aussie is hungry (and Aussies are usually very food-motivated, a trait that is not listed in the Breed Standard), he will look for food and find a way to get it! If this means opening a cupboard, jumping onto the counter, unzipping a backpack, unwrapping Christmas chocolates, the Aussie will find a way. Aussies see roadblocks, but do not submit to them. They figure out ways to get around!

As herding dogs or obedience/sport prospect, the Aussie problem-solving capacity can be a problem with owners who use repetitive, drill-style training methods. Aussies learn quickly and enjoy a challenge. Repeated "drilling" can quickly bore or even cause an Aussie to dislike the activity. Many Aussies will try to insert something of their own into the "game" and what they insert isn't always ideal for working or competition! Keeping an Aussie motivated includes allowing them to problem-solve.

"...primarily a working dog..."

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The average Aussie loves to have something to do. This doesn't mean that they are just "goats" and need endless physical activity, that is the contrary! Aussies need mental stimulation just as much as physical. There should be a healthy balance in this area or problems can arise.

Australian Shepherd problem-solving is not only temperament trait, but a motivation. They enjoy a challenge, they love figuring things out; success in solving a problem is a reward unto itself.

Many homes provide massive amounts of physical activity but not much mental stimulation, and this can cause trouble. Aussie puppy owners who do not provide adequate mental stimulation to balance with the physical often find themselves with a dog that is extremely physically fit but mentally very restless. This translates to a dog that is able to strip the wallpaper in creative patterns all day long with gusto and great stamina due to his fantastic physical condition (and his eager-to-problem-solve brain)!

Much has been written about the Aussie as an active breed who has a high energy level. A more accurate statement would be that a bored Aussie is an active dog with a high energy level. Aussies that have adequate mental stimulation can be very satisfied with regular leash walks every day and a few free runs or active retrieval games per week.

Examples of mentally stimulating activities:

- Food dissection (stuffed Kongs instead of food bowl)
- Delectable but difficult-to-slaughter chew bones
- Retrieval games (also physically stimulating)
- Trick performance (rewarded with access to highly valued items)
- Hide and Seek with owner (physical for both players!)
- Agility (also physical, but primarily mental...on the woodpile, in the forest, or on formal equipment in a class environment)
- Free play with other, known dogs (also physically stimulating)
- Obedience classes
- Flyball (also physically stimulating)
- Working livestock (also physically stimulating)

"...of strong herding ... instincts...authoritative...."

The ability to authoritatively boss around livestock is a trait that has been cemented in by breeders for a hundred years or more. The key word here is "boss."

Aussies like to have their world in order and know that they can have an influence on creating that order. This means that if leadership and guidance from humans is weak, the Aussie will step into the leadership role.

Just because they CAN do this doesn't mean that they SHOULD. Aussies are dogs that have various watchdog tendencies and the independence and confidence to back up a bark with a bite. The breed needs a good human boss to show them boundaries and provide them with the leadership they need. Remember that Aussies bossing around livestock is supposed to be directed by a person working along with them. Aussies like to have good leadership and to know what is expected of them. An Aussie that thinks they are the leader within their human "pack" is usually more stressed than they should be, and can even start to "boss" the human members of the household which can lead to uncontrollable behaviour and even inappropriate aggression

and even inappropriate aggression.

Another part of the Aussie herding instinct is strong levels of prey drive (the instinctive reaction to moving objects/pursue and capture). Prey drive is what makes an Aussie a motivated ball-player or Frisbee addict. Aussies love to chase and nip at moving objects. Children, cats and cars are often the target of this drive. It is important to channel this drive into appropriate activities and to teach the Aussie what is NOT appropriate. If prey drive is present, the dog will feel strongly motivated to express it. The owner must give the dog an outlet or the problem-solving, independent Aussie will find his own.

As a high-prey-drive herding breed, Aussies are usually extremely visually sensitive. This is important to remember during the socialization process. Aussies notice things that other breeds don't, and the socialization process should be extremely far-reaching for this reason.

"...he is an exceptional companion... versatile and easily trained..."

Owners of Aussies that have experience with other breeds often comment on the train-ability of the Aussie. Train-ability has nothing at all to do with intelligence...it has to do with the breed's willingness to take direction.

Aussie train-ability is a combination of mental and physical traits. Mentally, an Aussie likes to comply and likes to take direction. Physically, in order to be a stockdog they must be tough and gritty and bounce back readily from discomfort or pain they might encounter (getting kicked by a cow, running into a fence, working in bad weather, etc).

What this means is that Aussies need to know what you want, and are usually willing to comply when they know it. In relation to stockdog work, they readily change tactics and learn the wishes of their handler. If undirected they can feel a sense of anxiety and try to do things on their own, which to them is not ideal. An Aussie puppy wants and needs to be shown boundaries and feel there is a clear leader, someone whom he can look up to and take direction from.

On the physical side of things, a good Aussie cowdog is supposed to be able to get kicked in the teeth and get up ready for more, and dive right back into his job without apprehension. The cow corrects him pretty hard...and the Aussie bounces back with enthusiasm!

This trait of physical toughness can cause difficulties in handler/dog training, too. An example of this can be the use of a long line to administer leash pops (training for recall, stock work, etc). This can be a large source of frustration to handlers that have in the past used these types of training methods with success with other breeds. A Border Collie or Labrador Retriever would probably respond pretty well to a long-line leash pop due to their physical sensitivity...but not most Aussies. If the Aussie does not connect the leash pops to the handler, his physical toughness might cause him to ignore the leash pops. An Aussie handler has to find different ways to show his dog right from wrong, ways that allow the dog to comply with the owner's wishes rather than avoid discomfort. The presence of high prey drive in Aussies can mean that people wishing to have a great sport or obedience dog can use prey-drive games as high-level motivators. Some Aussies like prey-drive games more than food rewards!

Toughness/stoicism should also be considered in regards to health. Aussies can be stoic to the extreme. If your Aussie is showing pain, it is worthwhile to investigate right away.

"strong... guardian instincts ...reserved with strangers... aggressive, authoritative..."

- ***"...strong... guardian instincts..."*** Aussies are protective watchdogs.
- ***"...reserved with strangers..."*** Aussies are closely attached to their family but do not tend to seek contact with strangers, or easily accept strangers as "friends." This does not mean they are shy or aggressive. Aussies are selective in their social interactions. They can be extremely affectionate with family members but not interested in stranger's affections.
- ***"...aggressive, authoritative..."*** At a car wreck where people are injured and other people have arrived, there are A) people that step in and take charge B) people that follow A's direction and C) people that remain bystanders. Aussies are type A. When something is happening, they take action. They don't often back off from a challenge and their problem-solving abilities and independence cause them to try to manipulate their environment. They don't give up easily, either.

LIFE STAGES

The traits above express themselves very differently at various stages in the dog's life.

- **Puppies:** As youngsters, these traits are often blunt or not present at all. This is Mother Nature's way of allowing the dog to explore his environment and learn to accept things.
- **Teenagers:** During adolescence (10 months to about 18-20 months) Aussies often go through a phase in which they "try out" some of the instinctual tendencies that are cropping up as their bodies and brains mature (just as human teenagers do!). The traits mentioned above often express themselves in extreme ways during adolescence as the dog learns.
- **Adults:** True adult personality (18-20 months onward) is often very different from the puppy and adolescent stages.

So what does all of this information on the inherent Aussie personality and different life stages mean to the person raising an Australian Shepherd from puppyhood?

Basically, it means that the owner should be aware of inherent breed traits and also aware that these traits can appear at different ages and in different strengths. Particularly in adolescence, extreme behaviour can be seen. Owners should predict potential expression of these traits, recognize preliminary signs of them, and raise the puppy right from the start with the aim of prevention of future problems.

PUPPYHOOD

Puppies should be given clear leadership and guidance from a very young age, right from the start. They should have clear boundaries and understand that the human is in control of their behaviour. This does not mean harshness or strictness, rather that the human should control

understand that the human is in control of their behaviour. This does not mean harshness or strictness, rather that the human should control every aspect of the pup's life in a way that the puppy can perceive it. Play, food, toys, and access to valued items should be carefully controlled so that the puppy clearly understands who is the leader in the household.

Most Aussies are "easy puppies," and far too many Aussie owners ride along with the "easy puppy stage" without considering the consequences. An Aussie that does not have a lot of practice in bowing to a human's wishes does not easily take direction at times when direct compliance is needed. It is wise to train your puppy to be compliant, biddable and non-argumentative during the part of his life when it's easiest...puppyhood.

If your puppy is showing reserve with strangers and watchdog traits from a young age, be sure to recognize these traits and teach your puppy how you want him to act. Do not encourage behaviour in puppies that you do not want to continue in adulthood. What seems cute in a fluffy puppy can be dangerous down the road in an adult dog. If your dog is particularly sensitive to strangers, socialize more. If your puppy is particularly "watch-doggy," exercise more control so that you will eventually be able to manage him so that no one is in danger. Also, make sure the dog knows the house is YOURS instead of HIS by controlling every aspect of his freedom and resource access.

Because of the breed's extreme intelligence, visual sensitivity, and watchdog traits, Aussie puppies should be socialized in as many different environments and situations as possible. Herding breeds in general demand fully three times the socialization of retriever breeds. Do it, do it again, then do it some more. Maintenance should be continued for the lifetime of the dog.

ADOLESCENCE

The adolescent period in the Australian Shepherd usually marks the beginning of watchdog traits, reserve with strangers, and authoritative behaviour. Owners should be aware that during this period, these traits can be *extremely, alarmingly strong*. Dogs that were gregarious during puppyhood can start to avoid contact with strangers. Dogs that were never watchdogs suddenly begin to do it, and are often difficult to control while doing so. Because of the Aussie trait to move TOWARD things that are bothering them rather than backing off, this can lead to difficult situations. If the dog doesn't want to be petted by a stranger he may threaten the person with a growl if they don't leave him alone. People the dog perceives as "intruders" are treated with high levels of suspicion and may even be greeted with aggressive displays.

Many Aussie owners suffer severe anxiety during the adolescent period when the dog shows extreme protective/watchdog behaviour or extreme reserve. Be aware that the way your dog is acting during adolescence is usually NOT how the adult personality will end up...it is a stage that must be worked through. Just because it's a stage, however, doesn't mean you should ignore it and wait for it to "go away." Your dog is learning the whole time. If he learns that extreme behaviour is the thing that works, he will continue behaving in an extreme way. You must control and prevent extreme behaviour through management and socialization. You must never allow him to learn that throwing his teeth around is an acceptable option. You must consider how people that encounter him will feel if he shows this behaviour. You should keep managing and training until the behaviour lessens.

Don't despair even if little to no progress is evident. It may seem that no matter how hard you try, your dog is still over-the-top reactionary. It is NORMAL for an adolescent Australian Shepherd to show these behaviours strongly throughout adolescence. Keep plugging away! Your primary focus should be on prevention...so that the dog doesn't learn that these behaviours work. If you use careful management and training through adolescence, the behaviours will calm down as hormones and sheer experience turn him into an adult.

In regards to their relationship with their owners, teenage Australian Shepherds begin to push the boundaries of their world, just as human teenagers do! This means that Aussies might challenge authority by responding differently when directed to do something. They can seem distracted or even outright oppositional. Sometimes it may seem they have forgotten every piece of previous training! This should be coped with by strengthening control of the dog's environment and extra obedience practice. Do not assume that things will get better if you just wait. If you do nothing, the dog will definitely re-define his relationship with you. If you increase training and control, the dog will remain where he should be...below you in rank structure, a willing and compliant partner.

ADULTHOOD

Adult Australian Shepherds that have been properly socialized and trained can usually handle nearly anything life throws at them, but in a way different than many other breeds. Reserve with strangers turns into "I am not everyone's best friend and I won't act that way." Adult Aussies often ignore strangers, and are slow to change the classification from "stranger" to "friend." Do not expect your Aussie to be the Will Rogers of dogdom, "never met a stranger..." Treasure your Aussie's loyalty to you and your family members. Do not allow others to force unwanted affection on him. Respect his nature, and allow him his dignity.

Watchdog traits in adults are usually prominent, but a well-trained Aussie should have pretty good judgment of when it's appropriate to be a watchdog, and should respond to his owners' command of "Ok that's enough." A good Aussie with proper temperament will probably guard the car and home with savage intensity when the owner is not there. He may even guard like this with people outside the family that he has previously been friendly with...when you are there, they are fine, when you are not, they qualify as "intruders."

It is important to remember that Aussie threats usually aren't bluffs. If a cowdog is trying to make a cow move, he is going to back up his threat with a bite. This holds true in a watchdog situation as well. Do not put your Aussie into situations that will cause him, in his mind, to "need" to bite someone. If you do, you are almost guaranteeing his death by lethal injection.

Good knowledge of basic breed characteristics can allow Australian Shepherd owners to prepare and train their dog to be the best companion possible. Ignoring these basic traits during the raising and training process almost always results in problems.

An Aussie is an intelligent working dog, with strong herding and guardian instincts, an authoritative and aggressive personality, a dog that thinks there are no limits in life and that he can manipulate his own environment if he just tries hard enough. He is a dog that loves his family beyond measure and tolerates strangers with dignity but not effusive affection.

For some, these traits will be unwelcome and disappointing. For the true Aussie fancier, these traits are what make the breed the best dog in the universe.