

The Bullmastiff Personality

by Mona Lindau Webb Ph.D.

The first impression of an adult bullmastiff is one of power and strength. The square construction and muscular build coupled with the dog's confidence and mental equilibrium serve to bring about feeling of awe in the beholder. This impression holds true too, when you get to know the breed. Not only is the bullmastiff physically strong, but he tends to be strong-willed.

The main function of the bullmastiff is to be a guard dog. The sight of an adult bullmastiff greeting you at the door, by calmly blocking the way and investigating you before he lets you in is a formidable experience. Even more, after the dog has accepted you he will be quite friendly and affable.

Much of the breed's character traits derive from its function as a guard, a distinct kind of guard dog. The bullmastiff guard behavior is more that of the livestock guard breeds than that of the herding type guard dogs. Typically the bullmastiff will alert, investigate, and then quietly block an "intruder" with his body. The dog may get more active by barking and pounding the ground with his front legs. He tends to deflect and interrupt an intruder's behavior by threatening in place, using his powerful body and commanding presence. This is different from the typical herding dog guard behavior of chasing, circling, and catching. The bullmastiff blocking actions are usually efficient enough so that there is no need to grab hold of an intruder. If the dog ever does grab hold, there

tends to be less inhibition than in a herding dog with more devastating results.

Most of the time, though, the bullmastiff is not on guard, but a family companion. Bullmastiffs bond deeply with their families. Their family affiliation is not rigid, but can easily include friends and acquaintances into an “extended” family. They have an excellent memory of who belongs, and who does not. The dog can even have quite strong opinions about who is “in” and who is “out”, not always agreeing with the owners in this respect.

The breed is a definite “people” dog. They do best when treated as a family member and included in family activities. Bullmastiffs love to accompany you: to work, in the car, for a walk. They are a great addition to a party. They love to hang out with you and watch TV all evening long. They want body contact with “their” people, keeping you company by leaning on you. They do not even need a lot of action, as long as they are with people. They do not do very well being left alone for many hours every day, week in and week out.

Bullmastiffs tend to be quiet and calm, with occasional bursts of goofiness running around as fast as they can for a short period. Other than that, their main activity is when they alert for visitors.

This is a strong-willed breed. They also seem to have a one-track mind. Once they are focussed on a target, they tend to go through any obstacle rather than around it. It is also my

experience that the bullmastiff is quite emotional, and that the dog is one-track minded in their emotions as well. They seem to be steeped in one emotion at a time. When they are happy, they are thoroughly happy. When they feel sad, they often let everybody know about it. If they experience a feeling of anger, they can behave very aggressively.

The bullmastiff has a strong sense of fairness. I take this, too, as a reflection of their tendency towards a one-track type of thinking. In their mind, an action is either right or wrong, and if it is “wrong” they want to fix it.

The key to a successful relationship with your adult bullmastiff is control and leadership. The best time to gain control of this powerful dog is during puppyhood. The earlier the dog’s education starts, the better. It is easy to teach a little puppy to sit and down and come when called, using treats and praise, and thus lay a foundation for later control. It is a snap to start a young puppy paying attention to you on command. Pay attention, get a treat. Watch, hold that attention for longer and longer periods and with increasing distractions, then get a treat. If you can convince your bullmastiff puppy early on that you are the source of all good things, then he is going to pay attention to you later on, as well. The key is that if the adult dog pays attention to you on command, it will be a lot easier to control him. If the adult dog does not give you his attention when you ask for it, he will then ignore you and do his own thing.

Part of providing leadership for a bullmastiff is to provide clear limits on the dog’s behavior, and the earlier this happens,

the better. Some limits are absolute, for example, the puppy should not be allowed to chew on people. Other limits are up to each owner. Some people allow their dogs on the furniture, some do not. (My own dogs are all over the furniture.) Some are adamant about the dog jumping up, some are not. (I do not personally care, but most people do.) The important thing is to set these limits the minute the puppy arrives in the new home, and stick to them 100%. Within these limits, you can spoil your roly-poly bundle of wrinkly puppy as much as you want. Those limits never budge.

As the bullmastiff is such a strong guard dog, it becomes extremely important to socialize a bullmastiff puppy early. By socialization I mean exposure to lots of people and a variety of different locations early on. The critical time for socialization is when the puppy is 8-16 weeks old. Of course, the socialization has to be done carefully, given that the puppy is not fully immunized. Exposure by socialization teaches the puppy about normal people behavior and all about good guys. Then, when the guard instinct kicks in around 14-16 months of age, the dog will be confident and friendly in appropriate situations. The puppy socialization is the foundation for the appropriate guard behavior of the adult bullmastiff and the key for preventing inappropriate aggressive behavior during the rest of the dog's life.

Given the powerful body and mind of the bullmastiff, this is a breed that demands a major commitment from the owner in providing the right kind of leadership and control. The dog needs obedience training, and in my opinion, the dog does best

when trained to such an advanced level of obedience that the owner has voice control in most situations. Given the emotional nature of the breed, the owner also has to teach the dog self-control. This usually means teaching the dog to pay attention to the owner and obey commands, even under severe distractions.

The bullmastiff is not a breed for everybody. But if you socialize and guide your puppy, and provide strong leadership, you will have a fun and devoted companion for many years.



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