

## “I Read They Were Good With Kids” ....

By Rita Martinez, CPDT

When I was asked to do an article on this topic, my first thought was where to begin. So, let me tell you about Max.

Max was a beautiful little puppy and everyone was so excited about him when he was 8 weeks old. A year later, he was out the door and labeled as a bad dog. Had he meant to terrorize the household or scare the kids' friends? Was it his fault? Was it the bloodline? Was he so aggressive that he needed to be euthanized?

Vizslas are coming into rescue at an alarming rate. A high number of them (48% in my area so far this year) are for reasons involving children. We need to think about why this is happening.

Most of these dogs were simply in the wrong homes from the beginning. I have to shake my head at the common sentence that describes numerous dogs in any breed book – “Wonderful family dog.” What in the world does that sentence really mean? A family can be many things! **If** it means small children, then our breed may be better off eliminating that sentence.

Common exclamations that rescue coordinators hear are: “We had no idea!” or “If only we'd known.” This is indicative that there is a problem with how our breed is marketed to the general public. Vizslas are a **high-drive hunting dog**. That does *not* translate to an automatic *family pet*. With a good deal of work, they can be nice family pets--- but *only* with plenty of concentrated work.

Today's population is busy. Families with small children are *very* busy. Adding a Vizsla to that situation can be disastrous because good intentions alone don't raise good dogs. We must find a way to screen and then properly prepare potential owners with the honest truth about living with Vizslas.

Let's look at what went wrong with Max. First, there is little directed training except for worrying about soiling in the house. Then along comes the game of stealing items left around by the children. After a few weeks, the kids don't think Max is as cute anymore-- he makes a lot of trouble for them. Naturally, Max enjoys picking up all the food morsels they leave within reach, and now he is getting bigger and can grab things more easily. Banishing him to the kennel while they eat supper creates a terrible commotion with lots of noise. Mom is getting weary, and Dad is losing patience with the whole thing. Both just want some peace and quiet after a day of work!

So, they put Max in the yard to play and exercise himself and play with the kids. But, when the kids run and squeal, it stimulates Max to play harder. As we all know, puppies play with their mouths. So, now the neighbors are concerned that Max is biting at their children and he has torn some clothes. So, Max gets to go in the garage or kennel so the kids can play in the yard. More commotion.

Max is now a 45 pound boy and is having to occupy himself as best he can. That can include barking, chewing, digging, escaping and all sorts of behaviors that Max has no idea are inappropriate. He only knows that when the people come home, they yell at him like they don't like him and aren't glad to see him like he is to see them. And now the kids poke at him to get him away from them.

This is not a rare story!!! The lucky pups are surrendered to rescue volunteers who find homes that understand a Vizsla. The unlucky one are discarded in many ways: They are given away to another person who may not understand the breed (free to

good home), dropped at a shelter, left by the side of the road. Oh yes, by the side of the road is not uncommon – I have one lying at my feet right now, and he's not my first!

When the dog doesn't fit the home, humans become desperate to have them gone immediately. That's when I hear – "If only we had known" or "We had no idea" or the best of all "I read they were good with kids." So, let's take a look at why these things go so terribly wrong for our dogs.

- Children .Young families with babies or small children can simply be overwhelmed with the care of a young Vizsla. These are the folks who call and exclaim that they 'had no idea.' This points to insufficient pre-education and perhaps also follow-up support. The sad part of this situation is that it breaks many hearts.
- Training. Not only the dog but also the children lack training. Respect works both ways and children are, after all, children. Adding a Vizsla means managing both species 24/7. It's not always convenient.
- Barking. Often the solution to housebreaking accidents or chewing and puppy play is to put the dog in the yard or somehow isolate it. I think we all know how well that sits with most Vizsla. So, they bark to get to where the action is.
- Destroying things. This happens inside and outside. Many Vizslas are not good at separation. This behavior can quickly get out of control and become very serious. Also, most puppies manage to ruin something before they become well-mannered adults. Why aren't people objective about youth and/or training?
- Conflicts with other dogs or cats. It does take some work to accomplish peace in a home with multiple animals. Cats, hamsters and birds can present a problem for a hunting dog. And, why does the general public think all dogs will like one another? I'll bet these same people don't like every human they meet!!

Let me emphasize again: Our Vizslas are **high-drive hunting dogs** – the very thing most of us love about them.☺ However, just because we are comfortable living with this breed does not make it easy for much of the general public. If we are really honest, we have to admit that a Vizsla is a very poor first dog and is not well suited to apartment living with the owner gone 10 – 12 hours a day.

All of Max's 'bad' behaviors could have been prevented with training, understanding and realistic expectations. But, today's busy families are really looking for a wonderful dog like Lassie with short hair that is a nice medium size that possesses good behaviors naturally with no tedious work. They want a dog, not a project!

Besides being high-drive and excitable, Vizslas have a low pain tolerance, are emotionally needy. These characteristics do not gel with toddlers or small children.

The general public depends greatly on things they read on the Internet and what they are told by those from whom they are buying a dog. It is unfair to paint any picture that excludes the negatives – unfair for the people and unfair for the dogs. I deal with tears

and broken hearts with people relinquishing a young dog that simply shouldn't have been in that home from the beginning. It takes more than love to live with a Vizsla.

Here are key reasons why Vizslas aren't working out in many homes with children:

- Resource guarding. That natural behavior too often rears its head in a hunting dog. Some folks think it's cute as a puppy but completely unacceptable in a larger dog. How's that for consistency of belief?
- Fear. They are often lacking confidence and afraid of noise, people, animals, motion, and other situations that cause them to become fear reactive (teeth). Much of this can be avoided with proper socialization.
- Unsocialized. People keep them isolated as puppies and later as adults so that they have no experience to draw on. Everything becomes scary and they might feel forced to attack. Dogs need to learn how to interact with their own species as well as with humans – from Day One.
- Untrained. I'll never understand why the general public thinks dogs grow up and just know everything automatically. Only the Sony rob-dog has an off switch.
- Time. People with children are often the people with the least amount of time to create a mannered dog... "I didn't know he would take so much time" – that's a popular phrase.
- Exercise. "I have a nice big backyard" – have you heard that one? We all know what an unexercised dog can do to self entertain – it's hard on the furniture and the garden ☹
- Space. Putting an active hunting breed into a home or apartment with several family members and not much space is a disaster waiting to happen. Yes, I do know of cases where it works. BUT, the owners were experienced with the breed and do much to compensate to make it work.

So, the question becomes this: "How should we market our breed?" It can be answered with one word – honestly.

We love these dogs and enjoy living with them, and I think we forget how much it takes to raise them and keep them content. Many breeds take steps to make sure they outline the disadvantages of their breed, before commenting on the good points. Take a look at the Anatolian Shepherd web site, for instance (<http://www.nasrn.com/doyou.htm>). Perhaps it's time to use similar tactics with our information so the failure rate is lessened.

In my work I deal with all breeds and consider that an advantage. That can remove some of the blinders we build because we love our breed so much. Instead of blithely telling prospective buyers all the positive things about our Vizslas, we should be wise enough to protect this breed by being honest with who and what they are and placing them accordingly.

The choosing of homes is a serious and time-sucking obligation. This is the first opportunity to prevent disasters or at least increase the percentage of success. Next comes the support and staying in touch to know how things are going and hopefully help avoid a complete breakdown as with Max. These days dogs are shipped everywhere to new homes. It becomes a much larger challenge to stay in touch and be of help when you are not within driving distance. Can you really know how things are going when pups are shipped across the country?

Staying in touch for life is the best way to assure that the dogs are cared for and not put into rescue or simply dumped. It also gives a heads up to help

prevent bad situations from happening that later bring comments that your line is 'aggressive' or 'neurotic' etc. I have a non-rescue dog that is approaching 11 years of age. I am still in touch with the breeder several times a week and we actually are on different coasts. I didn't just buy a dog – I became extended family. It can happen--and it should happen---for the sake of our dogs.

This is a very special breed. We need to take care to enjoy it for its very nature and market it with sincere integrity.

Postscript: Max came to us after snapping at a child that had him cornered and was poking a stick at his face. He was evaluated by a behaviorist and after some observation time was successfully placed in a home without children and with Vizsla experienced people. He is a very happy adult and is bringing much joy to a home that understands the breed. He is one of the lucky ones – most that snap (for any reason) end up dead!

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