

## The Process of Evaluating Puppies Using the Hastings' Puppy Puzzle

(article taken from Everything Golden : The Online Magazine)

Pat Hastings uses a specific order to evaluate puppies. These are listed in her book, [\*Tricks of the Trade\*](#). We will briefly examine Pat's evaluation process this month.

First of all, evaluate a puppy's temperament by gently turning it over; cradle it in your arms, supported against your body. Does the pup struggle to become free? Does he lay quietly or attempt to lick you? Does he grasp your arm with his paws?

Next, using a mirror, look at the pup in a suspended position. Since the pup must hang freely without bearing any weight, he must be picked up properly so that he is able to relax. Practice will teach you how to pick up a pup by the bone structure of the head and between the rear legs. Once you can do this successfully, you will notice that "a well structured pup will hang in a very nearly stacked position." If the pup is relaxed when suspended, but does not hang in a stacked position, there is a structural reason.

Now look at the pup's overall balance in a standing position. Also check the proportion of the pup in relation to the breed standard. (i.e. height in relation to length, depth of body in relation to height of leg, etc.) Remember, *what you see at 8 weeks will most resemble the structure of the pup as an adult*. If something stands out as you look at the whole picture, search for the cause as you go over each piece.

### SPECIFICS FOR THE EVALUATION PROCESS

#### ***Temperament***

A standard of excellence must include a good temperament as well as structural soundness. A pup that holds on to your arm when turned over and cradled in your arms is usually an insecure pup. One who opens its eyes wide when tipped down a bit head first may well be fearful and grow up with an exaggerated startle response, become sound sensitive, and have a fear of new things in its environment. An aggressive pup will not let you hold him on his back, just as a pup that will not meet your eyes may not bond well and become an independent soul as it matures.

Socialization and exposure to a variety of positive experiences can help minimize certain traits, but the genetic causes of these traits remain intact. A pup that has a sound temperament will be relaxed and confident.

#### ***Head***

Examine the cheekbone ridge or zygomatic arch between the eye and ear to get an idea of how the head will develop. If the ridge surface is flat and the areas above and below it fairly flush, the back skull is most likely going to grow in proportion to what you see now. If the surface is not flat or the ridge is curved, most likely the back skull will broaden out of proportion. A significant indentation above the ridge between the eye and ear normally predicts the formation of a dome shaped head.

If the back skull broadens significantly, position of the ears as well as shape and position of the eyes may be altered. If the evaluation suggests that the back skull will remain in proportion, then shape and placement of the eyes and ears will remain proportionally the same also.

## ***Muzzle***

The round pellet-like formation that feels like a pearl and is found at the inside corner of the eye determines the width of the muzzle. If that pellet formation is present, the muzzle will usually grow forward in proportion to what you are looking at. If absent and you feel only a small indentation, the muzzle will most likely narrow.

## ***Neck***

The neck is the key to determining front assembly problems. The head should be well above a line drawn along the puppy's topline. If the head is not above this topline, something is not right with the pup's front assembly. Dogs have seven vertebrae in their necks. The shoulder blade of a short necked pup can actually hide one or more of these vertebrae on an x-ray.

Also look at the elbows to verify a poor front assembly. With your left hand under the chest, squeeze the elbows together with your index finger and thumb just until you feel resistance. If the elbows come together, there is a problem with the front assembly. The reason is that the upper arm is in front of the rib cage rather than along side, causing sloppy upper arm movement rather than strong forward action.

The importance here is that a dog with a short neck will most likely have less reach since a dog can only reach to the end of its nose. Therefore, the shorter the neck, the shorter the reach.

## ***Front Assembly***

Bones must be balanced to work in unison and move front assembly muscles properly.

One way to determine this is to measure with your hand the length from the notch near the point of the shoulder to the top of the blade. The distance should be approximately the same as that from the point of the shoulder to the notch of the elbow.

## ***Shoulders***

"The shoulder blades should fit smoothly and blend onto the rib cage." The shoulder blades should not be the highest point of the dog; rather, you should not be able to see them. A proper fit of the blades will most always provide the proper space between tips. If these tips are too far apart, the dog will move wide up front; if they are too close, the dog will be restricted in being able to lower its head. Both straight and short upper arms can cause a soft topline.

## ***Elbows***

Using your left hand placed on the pup's shoulder blades, gently push to the side. If the elbows move outward, this indicates poor muscle attachment and/or loose ligaments which will cause a dog to toe in due to throwing the elbows outward.

## ***Depth of Chest***

If the bottom of the chest at 8 weeks is flat, the puppy will usually retain this depth as an adult. If it feels curved, the pup will most likely outgrow the depth. The depth of the chest should extend all the way to the ninth rib. Check this by placing your hand on the chest between the front legs. If the chest does not extend back far enough, this pup is likely to have less stamina as an adult. If your fingers reach an

angle under the ribs, the pup will likely develop a herring gut.

### ***Length of Loin***

Loin is measured from where the last rib comes off the spine. The distance from the last rib to the pelvis should be shorter than the distance from the last rib to the shoulder. A loin that is too long reduces support of the pelvis, causing more likelihood of topline problems. A short loin, on the other hand, restricts the dog's ability to bend sideways.

### ***Rear Assembly***

Ideally, the length between the point of the buttocks and the kneecap should be approximately the same as the measurement from the kneecap and hock.

Stifle angle often does not show on a young pup. However, most often the sharper the hock angle, the more stifle angle you will see in the adult.

To check the balance of the rear assembly, drop an imaginary plumb line down from the point of the buttocks to the ground. The line will drop at the toes of a well structured dog; this is the balance point required for proper movement. If the feet fall far behind the plumb line, the rear legs are too long and the pup has sickle hocks. The hocks appear to bend in an effort to provide balance as feet are moved forward; this causes decreased range of motion behind.

The view from behind in a well structure dog should look like an inverted "U". If the puppy provides the appearance of a "V", this suggests a narrow pelvis causing the dog to move narrow in the rear. In general, Pat Hastings feels that the dog should not be narrower at the rear than they are at the shoulders.

A dog that moves wide behind may well have knees that angle out. The patella or kneecap should flow into the body. If the knees point out, the pup may be more prone to injuries due to the stress weight bearing will place on the other joints in the rear assembly.

Also check to see how the rear feet point when you pick up the pup's rear slightly and drop it. Turning in or out of the feet can suggest an imbalance of muscle mass on the inside or outside of the leg. (If the pup toes out, he may move as if he were cow hocked even if he is not.)

"Hocks are the cornerstone of the rear assembly. The rear pastern should be perpendicular to the ground, and the hock joint itself should have no forward or side motion to it." A shorter hock will give endurance. Ideally the hock at 8 weeks should be no more than one-third the total height of the pup's rear.

Slipped hocks, or double jointed hocks, are a fairly common problem that can often be identified when a dog will not hold its rear in the stacked position (the dog will constantly attempt to move a rear foot forward). Basically, weakness in the tissue causes the joint to hyperextend or collapse forward. Most times, if this is seen in a pup, it will continue for the rest of the dog's life. The problem here is that if one joint is weak, the knee, or next joint up the line, will compensate. If the knee wears out, then the hip is stressed. It is for these reasons that slipped hocks should not be dismissed lightly.

### ***Topline***

"A topline problem is rarely created by the spine. It is usually a compensation issue." Softness in the topline is usually the result of a problem in the front assembly, such as straight shoulders, straight upper arms, or a forward projection of the front. Wrinkles over the shoulders usually stem from straight

or wide shoulder blades.

A roach in the topline results from a rear assembly problem. Slipped hocks can be one cause, as the dog carries more weight on the back in an attempt to keep pressure off the legs. The same effect results in an older dog with arthritic changes in the back.

### ***Croup and Tailset***

If a problem is detected in a young pup, generally the croup and tailset will not improve. However, a proper tailset can deteriorate over the next two years since the three vertebrae between the hip and tailset are the last bones to fuse during growth. Poor rear structure and lack of opportunity for free-running exercise are both factors in poor tailset.

In summary, Pat Hastings reminds us that the three most important reasons For evaluating puppies include:

1. Determine Structural Problems. Breeders need to search for the causes of structural problems if they want to improve their breedings. Identifying a poor rear does not help a breeder unless you understand specifically what you don't like and what is needed for improvement.
2. Determine which Puppies to Keep in your Breeding Program.
3. Determine Suitable Homes for Each Individual Puppy.

**[Tricks of the Trade: From Best Intentions to Best in Show and Puppy Puzzle: The Hasting's Approach to Evaluating the Structural Quality of Puppies are worthwhile additions to consider for your personal library.](#)**