

The Truth Behind Pet Store Puppies

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Who can resist a puppy?! The word "puppy" alone evokes images of cuteness, furry balls of boundless energy, little baby animals that just yearn to be held and cuddled. This is precisely what local pet stores and breeders bank on when they flood the newspapers with ads begging you to buy their "cute puppies." Consumers mistakenly believe that a puppy carrying a high price tag means acquiring a quality pet. Boasting that the puppy "comes with papers" is an added incentive for both seller and buyer. To top it off, what could be more convenient than going to a pet store for your "one-stop" shopping, where you can choose your puppy, his accessories, food and toys, all under one roof?

What consumers don't see and therefore don't understand are the horrible conditions in which these puppies were likely bred. Most come from puppy mills. Public awareness about the horrors of puppy mills continues to swell partly due to news segments and programs such as Dateline and Good Morning America, and articles in national magazines such as Readers Digest, Life, Time, Sassy, and

People. News stations in Philadelphia and Baltimore recently aired segments on Pennsylvania's puppy mills in response to consumer complaints regarding the purchase of sick and dying puppies from local commercial kennels, breeders and pet stores.

Unfortunately, many people are oblivious to the tragic downside of purchasing puppies. Once enticed into a pet store, they fall madly in love or want to "save" the older puppy cowering in the back of his cage. What buyers don't realize is that this puppy they've fallen in love with may harbor a contagious disease in addition to genetic problems that won't appear for many months or even years. For many, the truth behind the pet store puppy is not revealed until the puppy has become a part of the family and many hearts and bank accounts are broken.

So Where Do the Puppies Come from?

Ask any pet store owner or employee where their puppies come from and you'll hear the same refrain: "good breeders" or "USDA-licensed and-inspected breeders" and even the false or misleading claim that puppies come from "local breeders." Mention puppy mills and the pitch immediately accelerates into overdrive: "none of OUR puppies come from puppy mills!" There isn't a pet store employee alive who hasn't heard of the term puppy mill and they all but perform cartwheels in an effort to distance themselves from such places.

Make no bones (no pun intended) about it: virtually all of the purebred puppies sold in pet shops come from puppy mills. To make matters worse, breeders now are intentionally crossing breeds, such as Poodles, with Schnauzers, Pomeranians, Maltese, Yorkies and even Labradors,

creating new "fad" breeds, many of whom have serious genetic problems. Stores and backyard breeders are now in the business of hawking high-priced mixed breeds, and consumers are paying through the nose for animals that are available from shelters!

The "puppy pipeline" extends from birth to pet shop. To understand the mechanics of the "pipeline," you need to know what fuels it: the dealers who breed and wholesale the puppies (the puppy mill owners and operators), the brokers who buy them, the transport companies that ship them, and the pet stores that "finish" the end product (the puppy) for retail sale, a process that completes its entire course during a 6-8 week period.

The Puppy Mill



Puppy mills are mass dog-breeding facilities where people breed dogs for the sole purpose of making money. Because they are in business to make a profit, puppy mill owners spend as little money as possible to care for their animals. When you consider that some puppy mills maintain up to several hundred dogs in a facility (some contain as many as 1,000 to 3,000 animals!), where is the incentive to provide anything other than minimal (if any) veterinary care and substandard housing and food? Socialization of the animals is out of the question. For many large-scale commercial kennel owners,

breeding and selling dogs is simply a part-time venture, secondary income which supplements their primary employment. The health and welfare of their dogs are definitely not a priority.



Housing usually consists of elevated wire cages, resembling hutches. The cage floors are also wire in order to make cleaning up excrement easier. Sometimes old livestock pens, chicken coops and even trailers are used to house dogs, and many animals are hidden behind and in barns or Quonset huts, away from the prying eyes of the public. The dogs typically eat cheap, dry food; drink stagnant, contaminated water; and lack bedding for warmth or toys for enrichment. The animals are exposed to harsh weather conditions: scorching heat in summer and sub-freezing temperatures in winter.

The parents of the puppies, called breeding stock, live their entire lives and then die in these deplorable conditions. Many animals are crowded in cages so small they cannot stand or lay down comfortably. Because the majority of the dogs live in cages with wire bottoms, their toenails become so overgrown they have trouble walking or standing. The dogs also develop sores on the sensitive pads of their feet, and suffer from crippling foot problems after years of standing and lying on wire. Since they are not socialized, the adult dogs suffer from emotional and

behavioral problems; imprisoned in cages, they constantly pace and circle due to endless boredom or madness. This is a behavior commonly found in animals confined in zoos. Dogs live their entire lives, which are considerably shortened by today's measures under these conditions. The average lifespan of a dog in a puppy mill is just 5-8 years. The females are bred every six months, beginning with their first heat cycle at 6-8 months of age (just puppies themselves), until they "dry up" and are no longer useful to the breeder. Very often, they are destroyed by a gunshot to the head.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) is responsible for licensing and inspecting these facilities, which it refers to as commercial kennels or dealers. Each kennel is inspected at least annually, more often if there are serious problems, but enforcement is very lax. The inspection reports become public record, but little or nothing is done to improve conditions.



Most of the puppy mills are located in the Midwest, primarily in Arkansas, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska and Oklahoma, although there is a high concentration of puppy mills just 120 miles west of New Jersey in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. Here, Amish and Mennonite farmers have also turned to dog-breeding for easy money and are proliferating in what is

known as the "Puppy Mill Capital of the East." The number of licensed kennels in the Midwest region alone is staggering: USDA figures earlier this year showed Missouri leading the pack with 1,325 licensed dealers, followed by Oklahoma with 525; Kansas, 460; Iowa, 375; Arkansas, 245; and Nebraska with 175. While Pennsylvania's number seems low at about 170 kennels, it's important to keep in mind that most of the kennels are located in Lancaster and Central Pennsylvania. There are approximately another 300-350 state-licensed kennels operating within the same region, with another 100 suspected unlicensed or illegal kennels.

Brokering the Deal

The intermediary (or middleman) between the puppy mills and pet shops is the broker, who buys the puppies at wholesale prices (averaging under \$100, but as little as \$10 each). By law no puppy under the age of 8 weeks can be sold at a pet store. This means that the puppies are sometimes taken away from their mothers as early as 5-7 weeks, before they are fully weaned. By the time a puppy reaches the pet shop, he will have changed hands at least twice, and traveled hundreds or thousands of miles in a transport truck loaded with puppies from many other kennels. All this occurs during a time when a puppy's immune system is still developing and he is highly susceptible to contracting infections and diseases from close contact with other puppies. The stress of transport further weakens the puppies at a time when they should have the comfort of their mothers' presence and care, and gentle handling by humans.

Brokers, who are licensed (or supposed to be) by the USDA, work independently

and, for an additional fee, transport the puppies directly to pet shops, picking up more litters along the way. Midwest-based brokers, such as the Hunte Corporation, Lambriar Kennels (the two largest in the country), Tracy's K & J Pets, Pine Springs Pets and TransPet, pick up and deliver the puppies to their facilities where they are held for up to 48 hours, cleaned up and given their "puppy shots."

Many veterinarians believe that, considering the young age of the puppies and how undeveloped their immune systems are, this constant stream of vaccines does more harm than good. In fact, according to Dr. W. Jean Dodds, a veterinary hematologist and immunologist in Santa Monica, CA, "Giving one or more combination vaccines to puppies before 8 weeks of age is unwise, especially for puppies undergoing the stress of being shipped elsewhere, because these inoculations typically suppress immune function for about 10-20 days. Any additional stress to puppies at this critical age can promote susceptibility to the very diseases the vaccines are intended to prevent."

After a brief stay at the broker's, the puppies are on the go again, packed in crates (sometimes 2-4 per crate), loaded onto trucks and delivered to the pet stores, hundreds or thousands of miles away.

Oftentimes puppies are shipped to pet stores via air transport. Here again, they are stuffed into crates and left at airports until their scheduled flights. From the cargo holding area to a final destination when they are picked up by pet store employees, the puppies may have been confined in the airline carrier for more than 2 days, hungry, thirsty and covered in their own excrement. Once the

puppies arrive at the pet stores, employees or the store veterinarian will again clean them up, check for signs of illness, re-inoculate, and put them up for sale. Puppies are not the only "item" to have changed hands. Remember, this is about the almighty dollar. Puppy millers have been paid \$10-\$100 per animal by the brokers; brokers sell puppies to the pet shops for anywhere from \$50 up to \$300 (depending on the breed) and the pet shops mark up the prices as high as \$1,000 to \$3,000 (just to mark them down to a "reasonable" \$899) so that you, the consumer, mistakenly believe you are purchasing a well-bred, healthy, quality puppy. Nothing could be further from the truth.

How Sick Is That Doggy in the Window?

Veterinarians report that the most common illnesses seen in pet store puppies are upper respiratory disease (kennel cough, which, if left untreated can lead to pneumonia), diarrhea, ear and eye infections, coccidia (intestinal parasites) and mange. Even more serious are the highly contagious and sometimes fatal diseases, namely, distemper and parvovirus.



Genetic diseases common to dogs from puppy mills are hip dysplasia, demodectic mange (above) dislocated kneecaps,

cataracts, deafness and epilepsy. Some puppies also develop auto-immune diseases within the first few months of age and will require lifelong medical treatment.



The most alarming indications that something is terribly wrong are the signs of aggression in puppies under the age of 6 months. Known also as "rage syndrome," the dogs begin exhibiting unprovoked acts of biting and food aggression. Not surprisingly, many of these dogs are turned in to animal shelters and breed rescue groups because owners either aren't willing to properly train their pets, cannot afford the ongoing veterinary bills, or simply realize too late that the puppy they purchased on impulse has become more than they can handle.

These are truly the ingredients of a "recipe for disaster"—the filthy conditions and inbreeding common in puppy mills, in addition to the stress caused to puppies when separated from their mothers before they are weaned and mixed with other mill puppies. The end result is a puppy with health or behavior problems that can end up costing you many times the purchase price. Even with the protection of puppy lemon laws, consumers who naively pay hundreds or thousands of dollars for a "healthy" puppy many times find themselves facing hefty vet bills to treat or cure their new puppy.

Registration Papers: What, If Anything, Are They Worth?

Ah, registration papers! What could be more impressive to a prospective (or current) dog owner than the ability to say "my dog has papers" or "he's AKC-registered"? It's a strong-held belief that having papers means a dog is "guaranteed" to be purebred or be the offspring of "champions." For this reason, many pet stores and backyard breeders advertise that their puppies are registered, or "come with papers."

Simply stated, dog registries keep records on dogs, period. Registries will, for a fee (\$10-\$35), record and maintain information such as the dog's name, breed, color, parents, and who owns him. ***Papers do not guarantee the health, quality or temperament of a puppy.***

The American Kennel Club (AKC) is the oldest, largest and wealthiest dog registry in the nation. On its website, the AKC clearly states that it does not guarantee the value or health of a dog. It is a "registry body" and "in order for a litter to be eligible for registration, the sire (father) and dam (mother) must be individually AKC registered."

Several years ago, investigative reporters and the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) set out to prove how much fraud existed among breeders, brokers and pet stores. Staff members with AKC dogs wrote to the AKC and requested litter applications, despite having a spayed Labrador Retriever. A few weeks later the investigator received forms for a litter of Labrador puppies. Other journalists and investigators requested and received papers for animals that didn't even exist!



Some lesser-known dog registries on the rise include the Pennsylvania-based American Canine Association (ACA) and the Arkansas-based America's Pet Registry, Inc. (APRI). Smaller registries include the United Kennel Club (UKC), International Kennel Club (IKC), Federation of International Canines (FIC) and other small, private registries. The ACA is busily recruiting Amish and Mennonite dog breeders in Pennsylvania - breeders whom sources say were suspended by the AKC. Many puppies purchased in New Jersey pet stores are registered with the ACA, making it easy to trace the origins of the puppies back to Amish and Mennonite puppy mills.

Global Kennel Club (GKC), another private dog registry incorporated a few years ago in New Jersey, is believed to be nothing more than a scam. The registered agent of GKC supplied many of his own and other pet stores in New Jersey with Pennsylvania puppies that were sick or dying. Global Kennel Club was the only dog registry option made available to consumers, which by itself is questionable, but coupled with the GKC's "Official (sic) Certificate of Registration" (obtained from frustrated and angry consumers), it paints a highly suspicious picture. Customers paid \$25 for a "certificate" that stated only that the puppy was registered with GKC. In other words, a

piece of paper with absolutely no value at all!

How You Can Help End Puppy Mills

When you purchase a puppy from a pet store or breeder, you're directly contributing to the "supply and demand" cycle. When you purchase a puppy in order to "save" him, you are actually creating more space in the pet store for another puppy, and you are helping to keep the puppy mills in business. When you want to bring an animal companion into your home and your life, visit or call your local animal shelter. Nearly 30% of dogs in shelters are purebreds! In addition, breed rescue groups are an excellent source of purebred dogs. There are also many wonderful, deserving mixed-breed dogs looking for loving, permanent homes.

By opening up your heart and home to a shelter animal, you're doing a very important thing: you're saving a life. Make adoption your only option: don't buy while shelter animals die.

Libby Williams is the founder and president of New Jersey Consumers Against Pet Shop Abuse, an all-volunteer, non-profit 501(c)3 organization dedicated to ending puppy mills and pet shop consumer fraud.

For more information on Pennsylvania's puppy mills, the perils of buying any animal from pet shops and general puppy mill info, please contact New Jersey Consumers Against Pet Shop Abuse at: info@njcapsa.org

Or visit the website:

WWW.NJCAPSA.ORG

