

Understanding Prey Drive

by Melanie Travis Schlaginhaufen

Through the years, I have met very few dog owners or even trainers who have a thorough understanding of prey drive—the canine’s inherited need to engage in the type behaviors that would lead to the capture of food if they were in the wild. The trainers who do have understanding seem to be those who train working dogs, or some of my associates whom I have trained who have my same desire for thorough understanding of canine nature.

Prey drive varies among different breeds of dogs, and among individuals within a given litter of pups. Recognizing dogs with the highest prey drive is important for those who are looking for a calmer pet that can be trusted around small children. A dog that has a need to grab and bite anything that he can chase will find the normal playing behavior of children (running and squealing) too exciting, and he may hurt a child even accidentally.

A dog’s reaction to toys may indicate his level of prey drive.

The behaviors involved in prey drive are diluted in many breeds—such as a Retriever who has the desire to chase and pick up an object and bring it back, but does not have the need to rip and tear and eat things (unlike a Siberian Huskies, for example, who often have no desire to retrieve an object, but might run out and get the stuffed toy you throw, and then tear it to shreds). The full range of prey behaviors involves the following:

- **Stalking** (common in Border Collies)
- **Chasing** (common in most herding breeds)
- **Grabbing and “bringing down”** (not unusual in dogs such as the Pit Bull)
- **Shaking and killing** (not unusual in many breeds of dogs, in reference to small animals such as rabbits, but yet bred out of dogs such as Retrievers, whom we would

not want to consume what they retrieve and bring back to the hunter.)

- **Consuming**



Developing a training program for a highly prey driven dog requires a different approach, one which includes both a disciplined leadership program, an “anywhere/anytime” response to obedience commands and proper management of the dog during its entire lifetime. It is extremely important to teach these dogs that human beings, of any size, are never to be perceived as prey. Ideally, all pups should be socialized daily with small children when the pups are 3-12 weeks of age, with a

responsible adult there to help the pups understand that children are not other puppies, and to correct any mouthing or chasing behavior. Children should also be taught not to do things which would trigger a dog’s prey drive.

Please feel free to e-mail us if you have questions, or would like to schedule an appointment to learn more about anything on our website, including how to recognize and properly train a dog with high prey drive.

