

The Soft Personality

A soft personality, as used by breeders and exhibitors of Brussels Griffons and other breeds, refers to the dog that is shy and skittish. They are difficult to lead-train because they are certain they are being skinned alive. They run and hide at the smallest unexpected noise, and make friends haltingly, if at all. As breeders luck would have it, this is often the most attractive dog in the litter, the one the breeder imagines in the Bred-by ring as she proudly exhibits the fruits of her breeding program.

What causes this personality, and is there hope? Although there may be external sources, of the type found in puppy mills and pet stores, the cause is most often heredity. Even if both parents are outgoing and full of themselves, a pup can come along that reverts back 5 or more generations to an ancestor of similar temperament. The experienced breeder can often pinpoint the culprit in the pedigree whose genes have intruded into this otherwise lovely litter, but too late.

And is there hope? Maybe, but sometimes not. Unless this puppy is truly the ultimate expression of all that a breeding program can accomplish, it probably belongs in a pet home, but there may be some measures to be tried lest you throw the baby out with the bathwater.

Good Brussels Griffon breeders know the value of socialization. It cannot be emphasized enough in this breed. Puppies should be raised in the home, introduced to the smells of cooking, cleaning, and other dogs; the sounds of slamming doors, television, and other dogs; the sight of visitors, friends, children, and other dogs. After vaccination they are taken out of their environs to experience new smells, sights, and sounds, always gently and cautiously so as not to imprint a bad experience. Is there a breed less forgetful and forgiving than the Brussels Griffon? Years after a traumatic event the Brussels Griffon remembers. How many of us have a Griff who will not let us trim the nails on one foot, all because at one time we got a little too close and drew blood?

If, despite all precautions, the perfect puppy is soft, what measures can be taken to improve the situation? First, a thorough health exam is essential, especially if he hasn't been to the vet since dew claws were removed. Sometimes it can be as simple as deworming. Other possible causes include allergies, especially to his food, deafness, impaired vision, or pain. Given a clean bill of health, socialization continues, with intensity, but also with caution. This dog will be even more sensitive to that unexpected incident, and more thoroughly and completely traumatized. If he goes to the dog show, carry him. An unwelcome encounter with a big dog or pull cart could spell the end. Keep his favorite things close by for comfort: Momma, a sibling, a favorite toy, his favorite person. Let him know, through your own confident behavior, that there is nothing to worry about. Make all his experiences pleasant ones: no pulling hair at the dog show for now and no dragging him around on a lead. With time and attention, he may yet become a show dog.

Always keep in mind, however, that the best place for him to spend his days may be on someone's quiet lap.

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