

American Greater Swiss Breeders Association
NORMAL TEMPERAMENT RANGES IN GREATER SWISS MOUNTAIN DOGS

Historical Use of the Greater Swiss Mountain Dog

The Greater Swiss Mountain Dog, also known as GSMD or Swissy, served as the all-purpose working farm dog in its country of origin. In order to fulfill these duties the dog needed to possess enough confidence to protect his family, enough reliability to work with people and livestock, enough structural soundness to work in most conditions, and enough stamina to pull a cart for extended periods of time.

Normal Range of Activity Levels in the GSMD

Variation in the range of activity levels exists in the GSMD breed as it does in all breeds. Variation can occur within litters and between individuals. It is important to get a puppy from an experienced breeder who can honestly evaluate activity levels and temperaments. An experienced breeder will match each puppy in the litter with the best possible home at the time of placement.

Some Swissys have higher energy levels than others. These pups may be better suited to a show or performance home, but may not necessarily be the first choice for an older couple or a family with small children. Conversely, a very laid back, low energy Swissy would not be the best choice for a competitive obedience home. Keep in mind that varying levels of energy are seen within this breed. In order to obtain a positive Swissy-to-owner relationship, the pups must be placed properly by conscientious breeders and subsequently raised and socialized properly by their new owners.

Special Needs or Concerns when Considering a GSMD

In any large breed there are special considerations that must be given to the slower maturation process, not only physically but also mentally. Care must be taken to make sure the pup is well socialized and taught basic manners from a very early age. Most breeders recommend puppy kindergarten classes from 2-6 months and beginning obedience classes from 6-12 months. Praise and food are wonderful motivators for the breed when used correctly. Harsher methods do not work as well and will actually make for a very poor working relationship between owner and Swissy.

Special care must be taken when large breed pups and small children are together. They should always be supervised so the kids and pups do not inadvertently hurt each other by being too rough or jumping on each other. It is never a good idea to leave an unsupervised small child with any large breed puppy. Pups should be taught bite inhibition. Ian Dunbar has written extensively on this subject; it is recommended that you read and follow his advice. See "Where to go for Help" section below.) A large dog behaving in an unmannerly fashion can be frightening to the general public. A dog that jumps on people, lunges or growls at other animals -- even in fun -- can be perceived as a menace. You can and should teach your pup to be mannerly on a leash and to behave properly in public. You owe it to yourself, your pup, and the breed to have your dog on its best behavior while out in public.

A well-mannered, friendly, outgoing Swissy is a treasure, but doesn't magically happen. It takes work and dedication on the part of both the breeder and the puppy owner to achieve. Breeders need to be extra careful to only breed friendly, outgoing Swissys. New puppy owners need to put time and work into properly socializing their new puppy.

Range of Normal Temperaments, Hunting and Herding Instinct in the GSMD

It should be noted that many characteristics in Swissys might not become fully evident until they become adults. In many cases, puppy owners can modify the puppy's innate characteristics through proper socialization and training. The normal range of temperaments in the GSMD can be from suspicious of strangers, to outgoing and happy to see everyone. Once introduced to strangers the Swissy should never show signs of aggressiveness towards people nor should a Swissy be so timid that a properly introduced stranger can't put their hands on the dog. Our Breed Standard severely penalizes aggressiveness and excessive shyness, meaning that these are not "normal" temperaments. If the parents of the puppy are not friendly and outgoing after being introduced to you, do not buy a puppy from that litter.

The amount of hunting instinct demonstrated by a Swissy can range from none at all to well developed. Subsequently, some Swissys may be good with other small animals and some are NOT. Usually, Swissys raised with other small animals in their households learn to tolerate these housemates, but may not take kindly to "strange" small animals that are not part of their families.

Early socialization around different types of animals of all sizes will help the pup be a good citizen around other animals. Swissys can show very little herding instinct to a keen herding instinct. Some Swissys intuitively try to herd ducks, sheep or cattle. The Swissy may also attempt to herd children or other animals found in the family setting. Other Swissys don't have any interest in trying to herd anything. It is important that pet owners buy pups from an experienced breeder so that chances of the right pup going into the right home situation are increased. It should be noted that in dealing with puppies, breeders are not infallible on puppy placement issues because puppy temperaments can change for better or worse over time depending on how the pup is raised. Usually, the longer the person has been breeding dogs the more experience they have. This provides an added benefit to the puppy buyer when questions arise or problems crop up with the pup later on.

Examples in Placing Pups within the Normal Range of Temperaments

If prospective owners live in the city, they will probably want a Swissy that is friendly to everyone and has a relatively low hunting instinct, so that the dog will get along well with people and small animals. If new owners live in the country, a suspicion of strangers may be what is needed; and if the dog is going to be a working farm dog, superior herding instinct may be an added bonus, particularly if the owner wants help in herding other farm animals. Pet owners and breeders need to discuss what the expectations of the Swissy is going to be and determine if there is a Swissy that will fit into that household. Puppy buyers need to be patient and willing to wait for the right puppy for them. The average waiting period for a Swissy puppy 3-12 months.

How to Properly Socialize your Puppy

Swissys are fairly intelligent and need consistent reminders that they are at the bottom of the family pack or pecking order. Some things owners and their children can do to reinforce the social hierarchy: Always make the puppy move out of the way (never step around them). Always go out the door or get out of the vehicle "first" (make them wait until given permission to come out). Eat "first," before giving the pup its meal. Ask the pup to "earn" its food with a "trick" (like "sit"). Make the pup move off the couch when you come in to sit down. Consistent use of these actions will help the pup learn it is at the bottom of the family's pack hierarchy.

Taking your pup to a variety of places where you will encounter people, other pups, unusual noises, etc., is a good activity when pups are relatively young so that the pup grows up with a wide range of experiences. It also helps to enroll your very young pup in a puppy kindergarten class and, once the pup is 6-12 months old, to attend beginning obedience classes to teach basic manners. Make learning fun for the pup. Use a lot of praise, food and be very fair and consistent with corrections.

Many Swissys become stressed when their owners leave for the day so care must be taken that the dog does not hurt itself or damage the home environment. Crating for short periods of time, containing the Swissy in one room, or letting the pup stay outside in a safe place during the day are different ways of managing the pup while the owner is working or gone from the house.

Leaving the dog at a reputable boarding kennel or pet shop once a month for a bath and a pedicure will help your pup become used to being away from family. The experience will hopefully keep the dog from stressing should it need to be boarded or taken care of by strangers in an emergency situation.

Moderate exercise given two to three times per day will go a long way in curbing socially unacceptable behavior.

Puppies go through a teething stage for the first year or two of their lives. Give your pup safe things to chew so it does not chew something it shouldn't. Raw cow legs, big joints, Nylabones and smoked cow hooves are all good alternatives. Rawhide is preserved with formaldehyde and isn't really safe for dogs to chew.

Where to go for Help

Your first resource is usually your breeder. Call your breeder and explain any situation that concerns you and see if they can help. Other resources include your veterinary clinic or your Land Grant College Veterinary School. Ask your veterinarian if there are any professional animal trainers or behaviorists that she/he can recommend.

Additional Resources

Dr. Elizabeth Shull, DVM, Appalachian Veterinary Specialists, Knoxville, TN, (865) 966-9166

Behavior Booklets, series of 6, "Preventing Aggression" by Ian Dunbar
Dog Problems by Carol Lea Benjamin
Behavior Problems in Dogs by William E. Campbell
The Body Language and Emotion of Dogs by Myrna M. Milani
When Good Dogs Do Bad Things by Mordecai Siegal
The Art of Raising a Puppy and How to be Your Dog's Best Friend: A Training Manual for
Dog Owners, both by The Monks of New Skete
The Greater Swiss Mountain Dog Club of America at www.gsmdca.org
The American Greater Swiss Breeders Association at agsba.com
Association of Pet Dog Trainers, Inc. at <http://www.apdt.com>

Suggested reading materials from the Association of Pet Dog Trainers:
www.apdt.com/bvlist.htm

Suggested reading materials from Society of Veterinary Behavior Technicians:
www.svbt.org/pages/reading.htm

Search for a competent trainer: www.apdt.com/cgi/trainer-search

The following trainers are familiar with Greater Swiss Mountain Dogs –
Sharyl Mayhew, website at www.erols.com/gr8rswis
John McWilliams, e-mail at MountainDogs4Me@aol.com