



# What Is It About Small Dogs?

About half of all dog owners share a special connection with a small dog. Part of the fun of the small dog relationship for many owners is the trifecta of the dress-up, show off and snuggle routine. I know some little dogs who are thrilled with the attention and others who are bored out of their minds with the fashion parades. But the one thing that small dogs are famous for is that they are masters of The Snuggle. And they have mastered the art of the perfect lap circle as well.

Most small dogs are alert, lively and happy. Some are petite and others hardy, but most every small dog is loaded with character. The goal of a small dog owner should be to build confidence in your dog so that he makes friends easily, and to develop a dog that responds well to consistent, patient training. (For example, often small dogs are more difficult to potty train.)

Small dogs can make very alert watch dogs, while being courageous and clever. What most people love about their little dogs is their playful and spunky nature, with an overabundance of affection. Little dogs love to be

with their people and are generally good with other pets, if trained early as part of the pack.

Although it's unclear exactly what factors have led us to this point, one might speculate that the celebrity fondness for small dogs may have made an impact on their popularity, along with what we hope is also a greater compassion for animals in general. We've always had a special relationship with our small dogs, but in this modern time, have we taken it too far? Of particular note, small-dog owners have a tendency to treat their smaller breed dogs like humans more frequently than their larger counterparts. This is called anthropomorphization.

In my home, we have medium- to large-sized dogs, and while they are certainly not my children or replacements for my grown daughters, they are definitely family. We say we don't go overboard with them.... But let's face it, we all define "going overboard" differently, and we do humanize our pets in some ways such as talking to them and 'speaking' for them – replaying what we think they



are thinking.

It always brings on a chuckle when I see little dogs being 'babied' – for example, being carried around in purses or clothed in dresses and sandals. This is when the smaller dogs are being treated like little dolls – or fantasy kids – more for the pleasure of the owner than the dog. A good way to gauge whether you're doing something for yourself or your dog is to look at its practicality.

I can certainly see the fun of becoming immersed in all the cute small dog accessories like funny t-shirts and doggles, and how easy it can be to carry small pups along on errands and social calls whenever possible. However, it's important to remain aware of the fact that above all else, our dogs still need to be treated in a way that keeps their best interests at heart as dogs.

Like any relationship, it's a balancing act to get what you and your dog need out of each other. For fun (and a good photo), I've strapped birthday hats and sunglasses on my dogs a time or two, but we also do regular obedience work and training, and their toys are most often chosen for their ability to stimulate brain activity (not just to sharpen their stuffing-removal skills). Do dogs like the hats? Of course not. Do they like sweaters and cold/wet weather protection? Yes, indeed they do.

Many therapists and trainers will agree that humanizing our relationships with our dogs is a giant step backwards, and that there is a need for structure and

consistency in the lives of our small dogs – just like those of larger canines. Data shows us that traditionally only one-third of small dog owners have taken their dogs to training classes!

This inaction has likely arisen from the misconception that because a dog is small, he doesn't require obedience – if he's small in stature, the issues he may display are only small problems, right? Wrong! Dog

trainer and therapist Lisa Marshall states, "The yappy dog doesn't have to be a yappy dog – there's a reason why he's a yappy dog." And that reason is usually because an owner hasn't taken the right steps to solve the problem.



All dogs, no matter their size or breed, benefit greatly both in and out of the home from basic obedience training. It can solve problems like excessive barking (or yapping), separation anxiety, destructive or aggressive behavior, among others. Obedience training is also not just for puppies! Many reputable trainers offer classes for adult dogs who need a 'tune-up' on their skills because there are lots of adult dogs (and owners) out there who need a refresher course. If that sounds like you, don't be embarrassed – you're not alone!

Owners who don't exhibit strong leadership and allow their dog to take over may find their dog to be snappish if she is surprised or peeved. Because of their small size and adorable faces, many develop Small Dog Syndrome: human-induced behaviors where the dog believes he is the boss (of humans). This causes a varying degree of behavioral issues, such as, but not limited to: separation anxiety, guarding, growling,



snapping, and even biting. The small dog may become untrustworthy with children and sometimes adults, as she tries to tell the humans what SHE wants THEM to do.

These behaviors are brought on by the way they are treated by people around them. Small dogs need rules, and limits to what they are and are not allowed to do. Be a firm, stable, consistent leader, and don't skimp on the exercise. Small dogs need walks, too! Take your dog for at least one daily walk to burn mental and physical energy and to keep a steady temperament, the goal here being a happy, healthy, balanced dog and owner.

The following are interesting stats that CESAR®, a dog food maker that specifically targets the small dog market, discovered in a recent survey:

- 97 percent of small dog owners feel it is important to have a dog in their life; they love their pets and treat them like friends and companions
- More than 50 percent feel their small dog is more important than their friends
- 4 out of 10 small dog owners would avoid having friends or family over if they were not dog-friendly

- Nearly half would consider breaking up with a potential mate if the mate did not get along with their small dog
- Over 60 percent of small dog owners buy their dogs presents for holidays such as Christmas, Hanukkah, birthdays or Valentine's Day
- 58 percent of dog owners dress up their small dog
- 53 percent of owners say they plan their vacations around places they can take their small dog.

I imagine that these stats would ring true for most large dog owners as well.

But for the segment of the population that has eyes only for the little ones, we salute you and your small friends. Whether it's the childlike eyes, the desire to be Velcroed to you at every turn, or the need for attention and security that the little dog presents, one thing is certain:

Small dogs  
leave big paw prints  
all over our hearts.

