

The Rex Files: Your Dog and The Law

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Every year 5 million dog bite reports are filed. Over \$1 billion are paid in losses. Reacting to complaints, city councils are passing ever more ordinances that affect dog ownership. Neighborhood, rental complexes, and home owners associations are including rules for regulating pets within their boundaries. Even insurance companies are putting in their two cents worth when it comes to our furry family members. While it's not always a top concern for many dog owners, it's definitely in your best interest to be aware of the legal implications of owning a pet. Considering that animal laws are not usually a result of state or federal battles (contrary to that portrayed in *Legally Blonde 2*), but rather the consequence of neighborhood squabbles turned complaints to local governments, it's the duty of a pet owner to be aware of possible nuisance factors and train your dog to be a good canine citizen, to prevent confrontation or the threat of litigation.

To start, you should become acquainted with the state and county laws as well as the pet-related ordinances in your city. These vary from location to location, and can often be found on the internet. These rules encompass such things as licensing and tagging your pet, leash laws, limits, vaccination requirements, breeding restrictions, and areas where no dogs may be allowed. While most governments have found it unconstitutional to ban specific breeds, you may want to check your home owner's insurance policy in case they charge a fine for more "aggressive" breeds such as pit bulls and rottweilers.

Keep in mind that just because there's not a law against something, it doesn't mean Rover couldn't get in trouble doing it. Good neighbor laws constitute practices that keep canines on the friendly side of the law. Gone are the days when you could let the dog out unsupervised to do its thing. Better to play it safe. After all, it is up to you to prove that you are a responsible owner, and that your dog is an asset to the neighborhood. Once you've given your neighbors cause to believe otherwise you may quickly find out how miserable your neighbors can make your life.

First and foremost, know your dog. Know what agitates him, watch for aggressive behavior and NEVER encourage it by playing combative games. (The majority of dog bite victims are family members. Never "mean up" your dog to turn it into a watch dog!) On the contrary, properly socialize your dog, and let neighbors, especially their children, know what your dog will and will not tolerate. If your dog does bite-or even snap-talk to your vet right away. Dog bites are the most prevalent and expensive legal problem; take this warning seriously and keep your dog's nose out of the courtroom!

The second most publicized pet problem has to do with irresponsible dog breeders. I'm talking about those owners who start with a female dog, and for one reason or another they neglect having her spayed. Within months Ginger is pregnant. Litter after litter, puppies are born, and given away, left to roam the neighborhood, or dumped. Unless you are a professional breeder with champion-quality purebreds, there is no good reason to breed your pet. Don't fall prey to the notion that Pookie needs a litter to feel fulfilled, or that Shasta will be a wimp if he is neutered. Above all, forget the idea that the kids will learn the miracle of life if their pet has a litter. Good, responsible pet owners always sterilize their animals.

To further foster positive pet attitudes in your neighborhood, follow these general guidelines: never leave your pet outside unattended. Dogs left outside may bark, dig their way out of the yard, or menace passer-bys. Keep Baron confined when he's not on a leash. Always clean up after your pet, even in your own yard. A lawn dotted with dog feces raises eyebrows of even the most patient neighbor. Finally, attend obedience training for at least two sessions to teach Rex some manners. You may consider certifying Winnie with the Canine Good Citizen test when she is past six months old.

Being aware and proactive about the legal side of dog ownership pays off for everyone in the end: dogs, their owners, law-makers, as well as the general public. Remember, it is your responsibility to show that dog ownership is respectable and responsible.

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