

# Top 5 Myths about Pit Bulls

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By PAM REID

*Editor's note: Jim Gorant's story about the rehabilitation of Michael Vick's dogs in the Aug. 15 issue of PARADE prompted an online debate about the nature of pit bulls. Parade.com invited the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals to address the most common perceptions — and misperceptions — about the breed.*

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## **Myth No. 1:**

**All pit bulls and other so-called "bully breeds" are aggressive.**

**Fact:** Many people wrongly believe that pit bulls are aggressive toward people. Pit bulls were originally developed for fighting with other dogs—not people. In fact, there's some evidence that pit bulls are actually less aggressive toward people than many other breeds. In tests conducted by the American Temperament Test Society, pit bulls had a passing rate of 82% or better — compared to only 77% of the general dog population. Problems for the pit bull arose when these dogs gained the attention of people looking for a "macho" dog to meet their demands. Like any other breed of dog, pit bulls are shaped by their environment and, if not provided proper socialization and training, can be encouraged to show aggressiveness toward people. Pit bulls that exhibit aggressive behavior toward humans are not typical of the breed type.

Beyond a dog's breed, factors that affect a dog's tendency toward aggression include reproductive status, sex, early experience and socialization/training. According to the Centers for Disease Control, these concerns are well-founded, given that:



- An unneutered male dog is 2.6 times more likely to bite than a neutered dog. *BOOKS MOVIES MORE male dog is 2.6 times more likely to bite than*
- A chained or tethered dog is 2.8 times more likely to bite than a dog not chained or tethered.
- 97 percent of dogs involved in fatal attacks on people in 2006 (the most recent year statistics are available) were not spayed/neutered.

**Myth No. 2:**

The term "bully breeds" indicates these dogs are inherently mean.

**Fact:** There are several breeds of dogs often referred to as bully breeds, including pit bulls, bulldogs, mastiffs, Staffordshire bull terriers, American Staffordshire terriers, Boxers and Bull terriers. The term does not refer to their behavior. It means they have bulldog origins and are descendants of the original English baiting dogs that were bred to grip and hold bulls, bears and other large animals. Modern dog-fighting can be traced to 1835, when bull-baiting was banned in England. After the ban, the owners of bulldogs turned to staging fights between their dogs, and the large, heavy bulldogs were bred with small, quick terriers to produce the dogs that became the fountainhead of today's prominent fighting breeds.

**Myth No. 3:**

**Pit bulls will attack without warning.**

**Fact:** No dog, including a pit bull, is likely to transform from a docile, gentle companion to a ferocious beast without warning. There are always warning signs that the dog is aroused, upset or afraid in a particular situation.

Perhaps the dog has had little exposure to children and is wary whenever he sees a child. Perhaps the dog spends his days tethered in the backyard, barking at people walking past the property. The dog's pent-up frustration could result in an aggressive reaction, should a stranger wander into the yard and approach the dog. The issue is not that pit bulls attack without warning; it's that often people don't recognize or pay attention to the early warning signs. Check out the ASPCA's Virtual Pet Behaviorist for useful information in understanding canine body language.



**Where are Michael Vick's dogs today?**

[Click here to find out...](#)

**Myth No. 4:**

**It's not safe to adopt a pit bull from a shelter because its past is unknown.**

**Fact:** Although it's always helpful to know the health and behavior history

Responsible shelters or rescue groups assess the dogs in their care so that they can avoid adopting out dogs with aggressive tendencies. And it's the adopter's responsibility to ask questions. Talk with the staff to learn if the dog has exhibited any undesirable behaviors. Adult dogs are open books — from the start, you'll know things like their full-grown size, personality, likes and dislikes, and grooming needs. Having a dog since puppyhood does not guarantee that it will have all of the qualities you desire when it grows up. The ASPCA encourages potential adopters of a pit bull or any dog to bring the whole family, including their current dogs, to meet the new dog.

### Myth No. 5:

**Banning pit bulls will help reduce dog bites and fatal attacks.**

**Fact:** There is no evidence that breed-specific laws — which are costly and difficult to enforce — make communities safer for people or companion animals. Breed-specific legislation carries a host of negative and wholly unintended consequences. For example, irresponsible owners forgo licensing, micro-chipping and proper vet care — all of which have implications for public safety and the health. Instead, friendly, properly supervised and well-socialized “bully dogs” and their owners are punished. Such laws also impart a false sense of security, because limited animal control resources are channeled into enforcing the ban rather than focusing on enforcement of non-breed-specific laws that have the best chance of making our communities safer, such as dog licensing, leash laws, animal fighting laws, and anti-tethering laws. Recognizing that the problem of dangerous dogs requires serious attention, the ASPCA seeks effective enforcement of breed-neutral laws that hold dog owners accountable for the actions of their animals. [Click here for more information on pit bulls and their behavior.](#)