

The Differences Between Male and Female Dogs

Are male dogs more intelligent? More loving? Are female dogs more temperamental? Find out what the experts believe along with the interesting findings from this 50-dog study. Plus: How breed characteristics can turn everything upside down.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- There's very little scientific research on the behavioral differences of male vs. female dogs
- Some experts have observed that female dogs, in particular unspayed females, tend to be moodier than male dogs
- The breed can also play a role in determining the behavior of males vs. females
- Based on the results of a small study, female dogs may be more visually aware of their surroundings than males

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Obviously, male and female dogs are different anatomically, but what are the behavioral differences between them? Is one gender more intelligent or compliant than the other?

The question of which is "better," male or female dogs, is a subject that has yet to be studied scientifically. But most dog lovers have definite opinions based on their own experience. According to PetMD:

"Some believe that the male dog is more affectionate and easier to train, while the female dog is more aggressive and protective of its owners and puppies. Well, the truth is that when it comes to dogs and puppies there is no superior sex.

[These] qualities ... are just the anecdotal observations of many dog owners. There is no study that has proved any general truism that a dog will behave a certain way because it is male or female."¹

Most knowledgeable dog people agree that a canine's behavior depends on his upbringing and training. Affection, aggression, and other traits — both positive and negative — are fostered by a dog's environment and his human caretakers.

Are Female Dogs Moodier Than Males?

Over at YourPurebredPuppy.com they believe that as a general rule, male dogs are more emotionally secure than females:

"Male dogs tend to be more stable in mood than female dogs – less prone to emotional swings.

*Male dogs are often bolder and more aggressive than females, although in some breeds it is the female who is 'sharper' and more aggressive while the males might be described as 'goofy,' 'klutzy,' or 'big softies.'"*²

They believe female dogs are a bit, shall we say, temperamental:

"Female dogs are more prone to mood swings. They can be sweet and loving when they're happy – but a bit on the grumpy side if something isn't to their liking.

Because they're opinionated, female dogs can be manipulative when they're trying to convince you that they really, really don't want to do something. Female dogs are experts at The Dirty Look and The Sulk.

*Female dogs are often less pushy and 'in your face' than male dogs are. Yes, females are affectionate, definitely, but often it's on their own terms. They may request lots of petting, then assert their independence by walking away when they've had enough."*³

Gina Spadafori, author of *Dogs for Dummies, 2nd Edition*, agrees that female dogs are moodier than males, but she makes an important distinction between spayed vs. unspayed females:

*"Unspayed females are generally moodier than unneutered males. Although males tend to be more constant in temperament, they can be annoying in their constant pursuit of such male-dog activities as sex, leg-lifting, and territory protection. (Some would say constancy isn't a positive trait in these cases, and argue that some unneutered males aren't just constant, but constantly annoying.)"*⁴

Spadafori also points out that while they may be more compliant than females most of the time, unneutered male dogs are often less attentive to their owners, even challenging their leadership, when there's an unspayed female in heat within sniffing distance.

Breed Also Plays a Role in Male Vs. Female Behavior

Breed characteristics can also account for certain behavioral tendencies and turn widely held beliefs about males vs. females upside down. Spadafori cites these examples:⁵

- In dominant breeds like the Rottweiler, females are often sweeter and more biddable than males
- In breeds that tend to be a little skittish, such as the Shetland Sheepdog, males may tend to be more extroverted and approachable
- And in some breeds, such as the Golden Retriever, there can be almost no noticeable distinction between the sexes — especially in Goldens that have been spayed or neutered

Spadafori offers this advice for prospective dog guardians:

"When deciding on a type of dog, concentrate on the breed or breed type rather than the gender, since the toughest male of an easy-going breed is probably a bigger cupcake than the mildest female of a breed with dominant tendencies.

*Talking to reputable breeders gives you a clear picture how the sexes differ, not only in the breed as a whole, but also in particular breeding lines."*⁶

Small Study Tests Cognitive Abilities of Male Vs. Female Dogs

In 2011, researchers at the University of Vienna conducted an experiment to see if gender plays a role in canine cognitive abilities.⁷

The researchers wanted to find out if, like humans, dogs have the ability to understand the concept of object permanence, which is the physical law that says objects continue to exist in the same form even when they cannot be seen, heard, or touched.⁸

The study involved 50 dogs, including Golden Retrievers, Poodles, Australian Shepherds, and mixed breeds — 25 male and 25 female.

The researchers attached blue tennis balls to boards using string, and then presented four different scenarios to the dogs:

- A small tennis ball disappeared behind the board and then reappeared
- A large tennis ball disappeared behind the board and then reappeared
- A small tennis ball disappeared behind the board and a large ball reappeared
- A large tennis ball disappeared behind the board and a small ball reappeared

Female Dogs May Be More Visually-Oriented Than Males

The results, according to Veterinary Pet Insurance, demonstrated a distinct difference between how the male and female dogs responded:

"While male dogs appeared oblivious to any change in the disappearing blue tennis balls, female dogs immediately noticed a difference.

In scenarios 3 and 4, female dogs stared at the different sized balls that appeared for an average of 30 seconds - three times longer than they did when the same sized ball reappeared from behind the wooden board.

*Researchers concluded that the female dogs noticed the change and therefore had superior cognitive abilities."*⁹

The University of Vienna researchers think it's doubtful there is an evolutionary reason behind the difference in visual skills between female and male dogs. However, psychologist and canine expert Stanley Coren, professor emeritus at the University of British Columbia in Canada and author of *The Intelligence of Dogs: A Guide to the Thoughts, Emotions, and Inner Lives of Our Canine Companions*, has a different opinion:

*"Whenever you find sex differences, you can usually find an evolutionary reason as to why these things occur," Coren told Science Magazine.*¹⁰

He makes the point that female dogs might need to rely on sight over smell to keep track of a litter of puppies, who all tend to smell the same. Male dogs are more scent-oriented (which is why they are often preferred for trailing and tracking work), so they may be less impressed by nuances in their visual field.

Regardless of Your Dog's Nature, Nurturing Matters

Perhaps in the future we'll see more definitive research on the natural behavioral distinctions between male and female dogs. But in my opinion, nothing will ever be more important to a dog's overall success in life than the care, guidance, and nurturing that we, as their guardians, provide.

Sources and References

[The Bark April 15, 2009](#)

¹ [PetMD](#)

^{2, 3} [YourPurebredPuppy.com](#)

^{4, 5, 6} [Dummies.com](#)

⁷ [Biology Letters, April 27, 2011](#)

^{8, 9} [Veterinary Pet Insurance](#)

¹⁰ [Science Magazine](#)
