

# The Unique Personality Traits of Ultra-Smart Dogs

People who are more skillful at solving problems tend to also be more playful. Could that be true for 'genius dogs' too? This group of researchers decided to put smart dogs to the test to see how their personalities compare to those of other dogs.

**Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker**

Dec 2, 2022 • 4 min read

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- University researchers in Budapest have conducted several studies of a small group of exceptionally smart Border Collies they call Gifted Word Learners
- Their most recent discovery is that Gifted Word Learner dogs are also “extremely” playful — more playful than typical Border Collies
- An earlier study revealed that Gifted Word Learners also tend to be head-tilters; the dogs (adorably) tilted their heads 43% of the time when asked to retrieve a toy

Recently, researchers at the Department of Ethology at Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest discovered that only a handful of "genius" dogs around the globe have the unique ability to learn the names of their toys.<sup>1</sup> These exceptionally gifted canines can learn names very quickly and remember what they've learned for over two months.

Now, a new study by the same researchers reveals that these Gifted Word Learner dogs — a small number of super smart Border Collies — are not just more intelligent than "typical" dogs, but also more playful.<sup>2</sup>

## Personality Traits of Gifted Word Learners Vs. Typical Dogs

Research shows that human problem-solvers have certain personality traits, and interestingly, one of them is the tendency to be more playful than people who are less skillful at solving problems.

The Eötvös Loránd University researchers, all affiliated with the Family Dog Project,<sup>3</sup> decided to investigate whether Gifted Word Learner dogs have different personality traits from typical dogs (i.e., dogs that lack the rare ability to quickly learn the names of multiple objects).

Toward that end, the researchers asked the owners of 21 gifted dogs from all over the world to complete the Dog Personality Questionnaire, described as "a validated questionnaire that reveals personality traits in dogs that has been used successfully in several published studies."<sup>4</sup>

The researchers took the data from the completed questionnaires and compared it to data obtained with the same questionnaire on 144 typical Border Collies from two countries (Austria and Hungary).

*"We restricted our investigation to Border Collies because most of the Gifted Word Learners belong to this breed," explains Dr. Claudia Fugazza, leading researcher of the study.*

*"However, it is important to point out that the vast majority of Border Collies do not show this talent," points out Dr. Andrea Sommers, co-author of the study. "And also that there are some Gifted Word Learners that do not belong to this breed," adds co-author Shany Dror.<sup>5</sup>*

## **Gifted Word Learners Demonstrate 'Extreme Playfulness'**

The researchers found that the only difference between the gifted and typical Border Collies, according to their owners, was that the gifted dogs were more playful. It's important to note that working dogs like this breed are generally more playful than dogs of non-working breeds.

Since Border Collies are intentionally bred to be working dogs, typical Border Collies are naturally very playful, and the gifted among them are more playful still.

According to study co-author Ádám Miklósi, head of the Department of Ethology, these study results suggest "a relationship between extremely high levels of playfulness and giftedness in learning object verbal labels in dogs."<sup>6</sup>

*"However, it is important to note that this does not necessarily imply that playfulness is what makes this talent emerge," he continues. "We do not exclude it, but it could also be that the extreme playfulness in the gifted individuals is driven or perceived by the owners as a result of frequent playful interactions with their dogs, with named toys."*

The ability to learn the names of many different objects is very rare among canines. By studying these exceptionally gifted dogs, the researchers believe we can not only better understand dogs but also ourselves.

The researchers encourage pet parents who believe their dogs know several toy names to contact them through the form on the **Genius Dog Challenge** website.

## **Gifted Word Learners Are Also Head Tilters**

In yet another earlier study by the same Family Dog Project researchers, the team found, coincidentally, that Gifted Word Learners often tilt their heads before correctly retrieving a specific toy.<sup>7</sup> They surmised that in this context, the head tilt might be a sign of concentration and recall in dogs.

The researchers discovered that when asked to retrieve a toy, the gifted dogs cocked their heads 43% of the time, compared with just 2% of the time for the typical dogs. It's important to note that the gifted dogs were just as likely to retrieve the correct toy with or without a head tilt.

They also favored either a left or right-side tilt, which remained consistent throughout the study, and regardless of where the owner was standing in relation to the dog.

According to lead study author Andrea Sommese, all the Border Collies in the study were familiar with the words being spoken, but only the gifted dogs — those who had correctly attached a meaning to each word — displayed the tilting behavior consistently. Sommese believes these results suggest head tilting isn't just a sign of recognition of particular sounds, because if that were the case, all 40 dogs would be equally likely to do it.

The researchers think it could be linked to mental processing — a sign of high attentiveness or concentration in the gifted dogs. The dogs might be cross-referencing the command with their visual memories of the toys. The team hopes to follow up on this study by figuring out what sorts of sounds might be similarly meaningful to the remaining (non-gifted) dogs, to elicit the same behavior.

## Sources and References

<sup>1</sup> [Fugazza, C. et al. Scientific Reports, July 7, 2021](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Fugazza, C. et al. Animal Cognition, August 5, 2022](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Family Dog Project](#)

<sup>4, 5, 6</sup> [Phys.org, August 15, 2022](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Sommese, A. et al. Animal Cognition \(2021\)](#)

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