

Both Ends of the Leash

Gender Gap: Do male and female dogs learn differently?

Patricia B. McConnell

“If you want a good dog, get a male. If you want a great dog, get a female and cross your fingers.” That old saying has been passed down through generations in a variety of fields from retriever training to sheepdog handling. But is it true? Are there significant sex-related differences in the training and performance of the domestic dog? When the editor of Bark asked me that question, I had an answer right away: “I don't know.” Trying to find a legitimate answer began a fascinating quest, which continues to this day.

The first obvious source for an answer is the annals of research. Ah, but it's only recently that the dog has migrated from persona-non-grata status in science to an animal of interest. Research on domestic dog behavior is blossoming, but most of it is about cognition and problem solving. That's great stuff, but it won't necessarily answer our question. I opened up my file labeled “Very Cool Dog Research” and looked at the studies within to see if any of the researchers had considered the sex of the dog as a factor. Nope.

Then I went back to the classic Genetics and the Social Behavior of the Dog by Scott and Fuller, first published in 1965. They found sex differences in weight gain (males, not surprisingly, growing larger in early adolescence), but concentrated primarily on breed differences, rarely looking at sex as a factor in any of their experiments. They did ask if sex had an influence on what they called “emotional reactivity.” Based on their scoring system, females average 5.0 and males 4.9 – in other words, no difference at all. (See Scott and Fuller for an explanation of their scoring and statistics.)



At the same time, I put the question out into the universe, querying a group of certified applied animal behaviorists and veterinarians board certified in behavior. I emailed the “Tiger Woods” couple of sheepdog training. Alasdair and Patricia MacRae, and experts in police and military dog training. In my blog, theotherendoftheleash.com, I asked if trainers thought there were differences in learning and performance between male and female dogs. (I did not ask about intact versus neutered or spayed; more on that later.) The answers were enlightening, interesting and downright amusing.

Here are a few of them:

- “Males are softer.”
- “Females are softer.”
- “Males are more independent.”
- “Females are more independent.”
- “Males are easier to train than females.”
- “Females are easier to train than males.”

I could go on, but you get the idea. Despite these contradictions, I saw some interesting trends. First of all, a great many of the respondents said that, in training and performance, the personality and background of any individual dog were more important factors than sex. Given the disparate opinions summarized above, this is a satisfying and logical statement. Looking back at the dogs in my own life, the two I am most apt to label “stubborn” were a male...and a female. The two who most fit the description “biddable” were a male...and a female. And the two I would call “quickest to learn” were – you guessed it – a male and a female.

Other consistencies in the responses lead to compelling questions in their own right. Many of the answers expressed the belief that males mature more slowly than females, describing young male dogs as “goofy,” “slow to mature” and “less focused than females” in their adolescence. This is an especially interesting observation given that in our own species, girls are known to mature faster than boys. I couldn't find any veterinarians who knew if this was also true for female dogs, but it doesn't seem unreasonable.

Another contrast drawn between males and females was that male dogs perform better in certain types of competition. From herding to Schutzhund to retrieving, whether we like it or not, they dominate the winner's box. Based on their names, 12 of the 15 winners of the last 15 years of International Sheepdog Trials were male and two were female (one could have been either). Since 1990, 19 dogs have won the U.S. National Open Retriever Championships. Sixteen were male, two were female, and one is still “unknown” (to me that is; I'm sure someone knows!). This trend is replicable in many of the highly competitive performance sports, especially those that involve large sums of money.

It is challenging to tease out why that might be true. One logical explanation has nothing to do with the ability or competitiveness of either sex. Dog-related sports like herding and retrieving involve a lot of money, and in almost all of them, intact, potentially breeding males and females compete, never neutered or spayed animals. (This raises a complication not addressed in the original question – when we say males, are we talking intact breeding males, or neutered males? Given that there is so little real data on the question of gender, we'll have to leave this aspect aside for now, but it is important to acknowledge that intact versus neutered could be an important factor.)

If you are running intact animals, as almost all high-powered handlers do in competition, the sex clearly has an effect on which sex you're going to invest in. You can't run a female when she's in heat, and neither is it wise, or ethical for that matter, to run a female when she's in the latter stages of pregnancy or nursing a litter. Who wants to invest large amounts of time and money in a performer who can do her job only half the time?

In addition, many competitors breed and train their dogs for a living. Say you own more than one top-notch performer. You will surely ask yourself which animal could best support your kennel and buy the dog food – a male who can be bred several times a week for a hefty stud fee, or a female who might produce one (regrettably, sometimes two) litters of puppies a year?

Another explanation is that there is indeed something about a male dog that makes him more competitive under pressure. Testosterone is a powerful drug, and we know it has broad-ranging effects on assertive and aggressive behavior in species as different as rhesus macaque monkeys and mallard ducks (not to mention traders on the stock market, who are more successful if they have longer ring fingers than middle fingers – which is believed to be correlated with the production of male hormones in utero. No kidding.)

There's another possible influence on the behavior of male and female dogs, but this time it relates to our behavior. How much of our demeanor around dogs is based on our expectations of “maleness” and “femaleness?” I don't know about you, but if I'm honest about it, I find myself strongly influenced by the sex of a dog. I'm not aware that it affects the way I train – I believe that, with good training, individuality trumps sex or breed differences – but I'm sure it influences my perceptions of them in general. Perhaps unconsciously, it has a significant effect on my behavior, and on the behavior of all of us with cultural expectations of how males and females are supposed to behave.

But are these expectations based solely on culture? Or is some of a dog's personality determined by his or her gender, as with the obvious sex-related behaviors like scent marking, roaming and inter-species conflict? Call me crazy, but I can't help but believe there is something inherently different about male and female dogs that is not just a misplaced human attribution, and that goes beyond the obvious differences. My soul mate dog Cool Hand Luke seemed so male to me that I simply can't imagine him as anything but a – well, a guy. My “real” guy Jim felt the same way too, admitting to a tiny bit of jealousy when we first started dating, an emotion he never felt around my other three dogs, all females. Now I have two dogs, Willie, who is one of Luke's nephews, and Lassie, Luke's 15-year-old daughter. I

simply can't imagine thinking of Willie as a female, or Lassie as a male. But why? Is this based on any actual sex-related differences in their behavior, or on my culturally imposed expectations? We know that expectations can have profound effects on behavior in our species. Surely it could be true of dogs as well.

You see how complicated this issue can become. (And I pose only a few of the questions that this issue raises – as in “What do you mean, 'easier to train'? Quicker to associate a sound and a behavior? More consistent once the behavior is first learned?” and the like.)

Here's what I do know. This is a topic that calls out for research. Dogs are finally coming out of the woodwork as interesting and important in our search to understand the biology of behavior, and this is a perfect vehicle for study. What's shocking is that we know so little about canine behavior, and what's exciting is that there is so much to learn. I remember being a freshman in college, sitting in an introductory biology class and thinking, literally, “Oh gosh, everything has been discovered already.” Less than a year later, I had changed my tune, having learned how much we don't know, and how much new is discovered every year. That's as true of canine behavior as anything else, and I am thrilled that dogs are finally getting the attention they deserve. For example, Dr. Anneke Lisberg just completed her PhD from the University of Wisconsin on scent-marking behavior in dogs, a topic we know shockingly little about. Dr. Camille Ward completed her University of Michigan dissertation last year on social development and play behavior in puppies. These are but two examples of the kind of rigorous science-based studies that dogs deserve. But we need more, lots more, and I hope the trend of investing time and resources into the study of canine behavior continues to gather steam.

Meanwhile, make your own observations about your dog's behavior. Do you see differences between males and females related to training and performance? Do you relate to your dogs differently based on whether they are male or female? We'd love to hear what you think; go to our website and give us your opinion. Meanwhile, back at the farm, I'll ask Ms. Lassie and Mr. Will their opinion. (Yeah, okay, I really do call them that. Oh my.)

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