



Paw Prints

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Columnist

How smart is your dog?

If you've ever heard about Chaser, the border collie who is known as the smartest dog in the world, it may really make you wonder just how intelligent a dog can be.

Chaser's pet parent, psychology professor John Pilley, has a background in animal behavioral research and set out to answer the question: "How much can a dog learn?" He worked with Chaser every day, devising experiments aimed at discovering the limits. Chaser had learned the names of 1,022 toys and was able to correctly respond to several commands related to each.

You might think your furry friend is well above average intelligence — but

just how smart is he, really? In the last two decades, scientists in the U.S. and Europe have been studying the cognitive abilities of man's best friend, and they've made some remarkable discoveries.

They believe that because of the unique relationship between humans and canines over thousands of years, dogs have learned to read us so well that, like small children, they can understand the meaning of our gestures and use that understanding to solve problems.

Dogs, more than all other animals, can understand what we're trying to tell them. If a human points to an object, most animals look at the hand, but dogs follow the direction the hand is pointing to.

In a series of experiments, Brian Hare, director of Duke University Canine Cognition Center and author of "The Genius of Dogs," found that dogs would even follow a human's gaze and go to an intended target. And if the human looked in the direction of the object, but not at it, the dog would ignore it.

An average dog has the mental abilities of a two-year-old child. This finding is based on a language development test, revealing that most dogs can learn 165

words (similar to a two-year old human), including signals and gestures. Dogs in the top 20 percent in intelligence can learn 250 words or more.

Neuropsychologist Stanley Coren, well-known for his research on dog behavior, divides canine smarts into three distinct areas: instinctive intelligence, adaptive intelligence, and working and obedience intelligence. Instinctive intelligence refers to a dog's innate abilities based on being bred for certain jobs, such as herding or hunting. Adaptive intelligence is about a dog's ability to learn to do things on his own to solve problems he may encounter in his environment; this area of intelligence can vary among dogs, even of the same breed. According to Coren, ranking the intelligence of dog breeds is best based on working and obedience intelligence.

So, while there are many ways to define intelligence, your dog's problem-solving abilities are probably one of the best ways to determine how mentally adept he really is. Maybe your furry friend may not know how to fetch, but does he automatically know that it's time to take a walk whenever you pick up a leash? That shows

intelligence, too.

For fun, here are a few standard intelligence tests you can try with your dog, and a scoring system to keep track of his smarts. You'll need a stopwatch. These are intended to measure problem-solving and adaption to the environment.

Let your dog smell a large towel or small blanket. Toss it over your furry friend's head, covering it completely. Start the stopwatch and see how long it takes your dog to get free.

30 seconds or less gets the highest score; 31 – 120 seconds would score the next highest. If he tries but doesn't succeed within 120 seconds, give him at least some credit. And don't forget to take the towel off his head.

For the second test, show your dog a treat. While the dog is watching, put the treat on the floor. Lay the towel over it. Start the stopwatch and see how long your dog takes to reach the treat. If he gets the treat in 30 seconds or less he gets the highest score. And within 60 seconds isn't too bad.

And for the last test, place a treat underneath a plank



PHOTO BY JODI SCHNEIDER MCNAMEE

Border collie Hank — of the smartest breed.

or couch, while your dog is watching. Push it far enough underneath that Rover can't reach it with his muzzle. Encourage your pooch to get the treat while you time it. Succeeding within two minutes get the highest score and within three minutes isn't too shabby.

According to Coren, the most intelligent dogs are able to understand and execute new routines with five exposures or less and no practice. They respond immediately to commands and will obey commands when their human companions are quite far away. The dog breeds that top the intelligence scales according to Coren are border collies, poodles, and German shepherds, in that order.

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