

Selfish dogs would rather play with a toy than help a human

Where's my toy gone?

Roy Van Der Wens/EyeEm/Getty

By Emily Benson

Man's best friend? Dogs may be more selfish than their sterling reputation suggests – or perhaps they simply don't understand our requests for help.

Our canine companions are unusually good at communicating with us, outperforming other creatures such as chimpanzees, says Patrizia Piotti at the University of Portsmouth, UK.

But how helpful are pooches when they know something that humans don't? To find out whether dogs will show a person where something they have lost is hidden, Piotti and her advisor, Juliane Kaminski, studied 24 family dogs in the lab.

Testing each one individually, the researchers put a toy in one corner of the room, and stashed either a notebook that the dog had seen someone using in another, or a stapler that it hadn't seen before. This was done in view of the dog.

When the notebook user returned and searched for the "lost" notepad, the pooches indicated the dog toy more often than the notebook or stapler.

And when the dogs did indicate the location of the other objects, they weren't any better at pointing out the thing the human cared about – the notebook – than the unimportant stapler.

Dogs like what dogs like

That apparently selfish behaviour isn't surprising, says Clive Wynne at Arizona State University in Tempe.

"Does the dog take an interest in an object that a human is interested in, or only in objects that dogs are interested in?" he says. "That got a clear-cut result: dogs only like objects that dogs like."

When there weren't any toys around, a different group of dogs did a little better. They gazed at a hiding place for about half a second longer if it contained the notepad rather than the stapler, though only if the researcher was speaking to them in a high-pitched voice. That might have excited the dogs, or indicated that the researcher was searching for something, the scientists suggest.

Message received?

It's possible that the dogs that went after the toy instead of the notebook just didn't understand the task, says Krista Macpherson at the University of Western Ontario in Canada. After all, dogs do helpful things all the time, she notes.

“Maybe you've trained them to get your slippers; maybe it's something more serious like police dog work or being a guide dog,” says Macpherson. “But the question is, how much understanding do the dogs have of these helpful behaviours?”

Although dogs are brilliant at reading human cues, they have a difficult time without direction, says Macpherson. Despite all that tail-wagging when you get home from the store, your trusty mutt probably isn't going to recognise that you need assistance in an emergency, she adds.

In a 2006 study, when dog owners feigned an accident in front of their pets – either a heart attack or being pinned under a fallen bookcase – none of the dogs ran over to a bystander to get help.

Lassie, it seems, was too good to be true.

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Is your dog selfish?

No way, never

Absolutely, yes, it only thinks of itself

I don't have a dog

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