

So Your Dog Has ‘Drive’?

By Sherry Woodard

When it comes to dogs, what does “drive” mean? Is there more than one type of drive? People talk about sex drive, play drive, prey drive. They also talk about drive in terms of high or low: a certain breed has a high prey drive, for example.

I have read everything I could find on drive and have found no scientific evidence that “drives” can be generalized in dog behavior. Every dog is an individual and should be treated as such. There is no special energy stored in a dog for sex drive or prey drive or ball drive. What’s important is not whether a dog has a high prey or play drive, but what motivates each dog as an individual.

We can learn how to use the dog’s preferences to encourage behavior we want or that the dog will enjoy. For instance, we can direct the dog’s energy into actions such as retrieving a toy, herding, lure coursing, participating in agility or flyball, catching a Frisbee, or doing scent work (detection or just hide and seek). Dogs who want to interact all day can be good candidates for Best Friends’ Search and Service Dog program. On the other hand, I have met many dogs who did not seem to want to participate in one of these activities until they were encouraged, taught, and/or reinforced.

I think the word “drive” is adding confusion to many human lives. Thinking we can generalize about what drives dogs is far too simple. Behavioral control in each dog is much more complex. I have found “prey drive” defined as natural behavior based in the survival instincts of wild animals. For the most part, though, dogs have not been wild animals for thousands of years and dogs have been bred for hundreds of years to create many different types, sizes and shapes of dogs with many different traits.

Of course, many dog breeds were developed to perform certain jobs, like herding or retrieving. But, I meet many dogs that get labeled as a particular breed because of what they look like, and sometimes these dogs don’t have the expected breed traits or characteristics. There are retriever-type dogs, for example, who don’t “naturally” seem highly motivated to retrieve. I think the concept of “drive” is over-used and misunderstood – and can lead to people feeling disappointed in their dog’s level of drive. It’s not just genetics that influence who a dog is. The social skills a dog develops and the training techniques used also affect a dog’s overall personality, energy level, potential reached, and ability to show his true self. Fearful dogs may seem to have low energy: They may not play or chase anything.



Again, each dog should be treated as an individual; your dog's energy level, motivations and preferences are unique to him/her. You can influence your dog's behavior by rewarding the behavior you like. If your dog has extreme behavior or behavior you do not like, manage the dog so that she does not practice unwanted behavior while giving her other options that are more acceptable to you. (Please read "Managing a Dog with Behavior Challenges.") If your dog's behavior changes suddenly, make an appointment with your vet for a checkup because behavior changes can signal illness or injury.

Instead of focusing on how much (or how little) drive your dog has, I recommend that you concentrate on building a great relationship with your dog and directing your dog's energy into activities you can both enjoy. Try different toys, use different play spaces and have fun together!

Sherry Woodard is the animal behavior and training consultant at Best Friends. She develops resources and provides consulting services nationally to help achieve Best Friends' No More Homeless Pets mission.

See also: [Managing a Dog with Behavior Challenges](#)