

# Basic Potbellied Pig Behavior

Pigs are some of the most maligned of critters. The stereotype is that pigs are dirty, stupid, lazy and naturally fat. On the contrary, all pigs – including potbellied pigs, farm pigs and wild pigs – are clean, smart, resourceful and not naturally obese.



## Myths About Potbellied Pigs

Pigs are often seen as dirty animals because they do like to bathe in mud on occasion. These mud baths are beneficial to pigs for several reasons: Pigs don't sweat, so the mud cools the pigs in hot weather. Also, a coating of mud keeps insects off the pigs and it exfoliates their skin. Keep in mind that children will play in mud puddles and adults will pay good money for mud facials and body treatments! Though pigs like mud, they don't want to live in it entirely – they prefer a designated mud hole. (By the way, farm hogs aren't filthy animals either; it's just that they are often forced to live in filthy enclosures.)

In terms of their potty habits, pigs are similar to other animals. They will designate a particular area of their enclosure to use as a bathroom, provided their enclosures are adequate in size. Pigs who are living in enclosures full of mud and muck and feces are not happy campers.

Another myth is that pigs are stupid. Quite the contrary! They are actually very intelligent, curious and sensitive creatures. They can be trained to do anything a dog can do, and it has been proven repeatedly that pigs are smarter than dogs.

Pigs are not typically lazy, and obesity is not their natural state. In the wild, they would be on the move frequently in pursuit of food, so they are not lazy animals by nature. Pigs would never be obese in the wild because of the constant foraging. Also, pigs' legs can be fragile – they weren't designed to hold extra weight, which is why obese pigs are prone to leg problems and arthritis.

## Potbellied Pigs and Dominance

In general, pigs are friendly toward each other and people, but just as with dogs, some pigs are passive and some are dominant. Each member of a pig's family (which includes the humans) has a particular place in the pecking order. As the human caretaker, you need to establish yourself as the "alpha pig." If you allow the pig to become dominant, the pig may become aggressive.

To become the alpha pig, project confidence around the pig and correct any dominant behavior that the pig displays. If a pig attempts to bite you, another person or another pig, say "BAD PIG" in a loud, firm voice. You can also stamp your foot or, if warranted,

use your hand to simulate a nip on the pig's shoulder or rump. Don't ever hit your pig. A word of caution here: Pigs can bite back, so be careful!

Aggression in pigs is a common reason for people to surrender their potbellied pigs, so you'll want to set yourself up as the alpha pig early on in the relationship. Pigs can be retrained to understand that they are not dominant over humans, but it's easier to establish the proper hierarchy at the start, when they are young and much easier to train.

In their relationships with each other, pigs will naturally establish a hierarchy among themselves, which may involve aggressive behavior at times. Although this behavior is normal, it does need to be monitored in pigs who are housed in enclosures because the pigs who are being harassed cannot escape the dominant pigs, as they would be able to do in the wild. Pigs are susceptible to stress-related illnesses, so keep an eye on any pig who is being picked on and intervene if necessary.

### **Pig Body Language**

How does a pig show aggression? Well, it depends on the pig, but some common signals are the pig will become pushy, his tail may get stiff, his hackles may go up or he may "chatter" at you. By contrast, if a pig is feeling happy, you'll see different body language. If a pig is the affectionate type, she'll rub her head on your leg or nuzzle you. She'll give you a happy grunt if she's the vocal type. As you get to know your pig, you'll learn how to recognize when your pig is mad, sad or glad.

*Yvonne McIntosh is the potbellied pig specialist, adoption coordinator and manager for Best Friends Animal Society. If you have questions related to anything piggy, please send an e-mail to [yvonnem@bestfriends.org](mailto:yvonnem@bestfriends.org).*