

Study finds low agreeableness linked to a preference for aggressive dogs

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A study carried out at the University of Leicester's School of Psychology has found that younger people who are disagreeable are more likely to prefer aggressive dogs, confirming the conventional wisdom that dogs match the personality of their owners.

Researchers found that low Agreeableness was the best predictor of a preference for those dogs seen as more aggressive, such as bull terriers or boxers. Individuals low in Agreeableness are typically less concerned with others' well-being and may be suspicious, unfriendly and competitive.

However, the study found no link between liking an aggressive dog and [delinquent behaviour](#), or the possibility that liking an aggressive dog is an act of 'status display' to show off or attract [romantic partners](#).

Dr Vincent Egan, lead researcher on the study, said:

"This type of study is important, as it shows [assumptions](#) are not the whole picture. It is assumed owners of aggressive dogs (or dogs perceived as aggressive) are antisocial show-offs. But we did not find persons who expressed a preference for aggressive dogs had committed more delinquent acts, or reported showing off more.

"However, we did find a preference for a dog with an aggressive [reputation](#) was related to being younger and being lower in Agreeableness (i.e., being less concerned with the needs of others, and being quicker to become hostile)."

The study looked at the reasons why some people prefer aggressive dog breeds. Professor Egan explained:

"A lot of [human behaviour](#) involves status display and [dominance](#), and evolutionarily this helps with

finding mates. Basic [personality](#) also influences a lot of our behaviour. By measuring both at the same time, we could see whether they each had an influence on liking aggressive dogs, or whether one was due to another.

"We were surprised mating effort did not have an influence here, but think it might be because we looked at a wider age range. A preference for a non-aggressive dog may also make a statement about a person; liking a pedigree Labrador or a clipped Poodle may be as much a statement as having a pit-bull with a studded collar."

In the study, participants indicated their preference for different types of dogs, and filled in personality tests. The dogs were independently rated according to how aggressive people perceived them to be. Bull terriers were rated as most aggressive, followed by boxers; retrievers and cocker spaniels were seen as least aggressive.

Analysing the findings, the research team found that certain personality factors indicated a preference for dogs perceived to be more aggressive. Low [agreeableness](#) and higher conscientiousness were related to a preference for aggressive dog breeds. Younger people were also more likely to prefer the aggressive breeds.

Surprisingly, the results indicated a small effect suggesting that those who liked aggressive dogs showed signs of conscientiousness - being careful, reliable and thoughtful about their actions. This contradicts the perception that owners of aggressive dogs are always irresponsible.

Dr Egan said:

"These results with Conscientiousness were unexpected, but the effect is a small one, and needs to be repeated in a different group of people. Studies of this kind tend to only look at a restricted age ranges, which may exaggerate findings which

do not occur across the entire lifespan, so we believe a stereotype is always true, whereas it may only be true under certain conditions. Our study employed a broader age range.

"We were surprised to find a small association between a [preference](#) for aggressive dogs and greater Conscientiousness (i.e., valuing and following rules). However, dogs also prefer rules and firm boundaries themselves. We speculate that cheap dog-training classes would be enjoyable and beneficial for both dog and owner."

More information: Egan, V., & McKenzie, J. (2012). Top Dogs: canine preference, personality, delinquency and mating effort. *Anthrozoos*, 25, 161 - 170. [DOI: 10.2752/175303712X13316289505305](https://doi.org/10.2752/175303712X13316289505305)

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