

Sex Differences in Dogs and Cats
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A reader wrote us recently and asked us to address the topic of sex differences in the behavior of companion cats and dogs. As she noted in her letter, there are lots of opinions about how males and females are different from each other. For example, we have heard people say that females are friendlier and make the best pets while males make the better watch and protection dogs. In fact many police and military organizations use only non-neutered males and not females for their police and security work.

While there is no lack of opinion about sex differences in temperament and behavior, there is very little scientific data relating to the issue. The obvious differences, which are well known and well documented, relate to the different sexual functions of males and females. Non-neutered males of both cat and dog species urine mark to attract mates and to defend territories against other male competitors. Males fight with other males, roam the neighborhood looking for mates and competitors and become amorous with females and even inappropriate objects like a person's leg. Non-spayed females have regular reproductive cycles during which their behavior changes. When they are sexually receptive or "in heat", they may urine mark, roam the neighborhood, vocalize, and mate with the males. When they have young, they spend lots of time taking care of them and may become aggressively protective.

All of these differences are seen in reproductively active cats and dogs. Spaying and neutering females and males can often reduce or eliminate these behaviors and thus make females and males more alike.

What about behaviors that aren't related to sex? Do females really make the best pets? The answer at this time is: it's a matter of opinion. There have been no carefully done observational studies of males and females that would help us to answer the question. In the book [The Perfect Puppy](#) by Benjamin and Lynette Hart, a number of veterinarians and obedience judges were asked to give their opinions of male – female differences with regard to a variety of behavioral traits. In this survey, females were rated to be easier to obedience train and easier to housebreak while males were rated to be more dominant over the owner and more aggressive to other dogs. No other differences were reported. There is enormous individual variation within the sexes and this undoubtedly makes sex differences harder to identify. Until there are better studies, questions about sex differences in behavior of companion animals will remain a matter of debate.