

Are Yawns Contagious with Dogs?

By Comfort for Critters

Yawning sure seems to be contagious. You see someone do it, and it's hard to resist it yourself. Studies now suggest that our ability to yawn is directly related to our ability to show empathy. In most primates (including us humans) we are much more likely to yawn when surrounded by other primates we are close to. If we see them yawn, about half of us will yawn in response.

Research is now reinforcing the special bond people have with dogs by showing that they will contagiously yawn when their human companion yawns. This is true of all species tested, from Teacup Poodles to Pit bulls. Interestingly, they do not exhibit this behavior when other dogs yawn, when strangers yawn, or when "control" sounds are played (yawn-sound played backwards, for instance).

The dogs were also not easily fooled. When their owners faked a yawn, this didn't trick the dog! The dogs were four times more likely to yawn when their human companion genuinely yawned, than in response to any of the other sounds or even fake-yawns.

Dogs are especially adept at reading our behavior, sensing our emotions, being a true companion in the ups and downs of life. It shouldn't be surprising that if any pet is going to demonstrate cross-species empathy, it will be dogs. They seem to save their compassion and support for the humans in their life.

Wolves, a close relative to modern day dogs, have also demonstrated contagious yawning. So far, dogs and wolves are the only non-primate species to exhibit this trait, though more research is currently underway. Scientists speculate that only highly-social animals are likely to show this behavior. It's interesting to consider the role empathy plays in our pets, and in the lives of all animals.

Cross-species empathy reflects just one more way we are bonded to our pets. What a blessing they are...we are fortunate to be able to bless them in return!

Have you ever "caught" a yawn from your dog?

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