

Catching wolves catching yawns

By Los Angeles Times, adapted by Newsela staff

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One of five wolf pups rescued from the edge of the Funny River wildfire in Alaska on May 27, 2014, is cared for at the veterinary facility of the Alaska Zoo in Anchorage.

When someone yawns near you, you yawn too. The same is true among chimpanzees and baboons. Even dogs do it. They all seem to “catch” a yawn when someone near them yawns. But why? Scientists believe it is a sign that these animals can feel empathy.

Empathy is when you feel what someone else is feeling. A new study of wolves suggests that more animals can feel empathy than experts had realized.

Humans are more likely to catch a yawn when they are around people they feel close to. The same goes for the other primates, like chimps. People who get high scores on empathy tests are more likely to yawn when others do.

Dogs can also catch a yawn. Yet, dogs don't yawn when other dogs do. Instead, they yawn when people yawn. And dogs are more likely to yawn when they get along very well with their owner.

Dogs Can Read People

A team of scientists in Japan wanted to know if dogs learned to yawn by spending so much time close to humans.

Dogs are very skilled at reading human behaviors, the scientists said. They thought it might be possible that dogs evolved to yawn over all the time humans and dogs have lived with each other.

Were any other animals capable of catching a yawn?

If dogs were born knowing to catch yawns, then wolves should also be. Wolves are the closest relatives of dogs.

So the scientists went to a zoo near Tokyo where there was a pack of 12 wolves. There was a mother, a father and their 10 offspring. The scientists watched them over five months.

The scientists only looked at certain wolf yawns. The yawns they were interested in were yawns that occurred when wolves were awake and relaxed, and not in distress. When they saw a wolf yawn, the scientists wrote down which one it was. They also noted the other wolves nearby, and where these wolves were looking when the yawn happened.

It's A Pack Thing

Then the scientists watched the nearby wolves for the next three minutes. They wanted to see if any of them yawned too. If they did, they noted the time between the first yawn and the following yawn.

The scientists also watched the wolves when they were not yawning, to make sure they did not just yawn anytime.

The scientists found that the wolves were more likely to yawn after another wolf near them had yawned. One wolf yawning could make another wolf yawn, but it happened more often if the two animals were friends. Yawns were also more likely to spread if they could be seen, not just heard.

“Yawning in wolves is contagious,” the scientists decided. It makes sense, they said. Yawning is a behavior that helps wolves work together as a pack.

Yawns from wolves who were friends were more catching than yawns from others. The scientists believe it proves that wolves have empathy. They also think that many other animals may feel empathy.

Quiz

1. All of the following are able to “catch” a yawn in a similar manner EXCEPT:
 - (a) baboons
 - (b) dogs
 - (c) humans
 - (d) wolves

2. Why did the Japanese scientists study wolves for five months?
 - (a) to check the time between the first yawn and the following yawn
 - (b) to check the ability of wolves to yawn under distress
 - (c) to see how they react when under distress
 - (d) to check if they are able to “catch” a yawn

3. What does the ability of contagious yawning in wolves prove?
 - (a) It shows they have empathy.
 - (b) It shows they make friends easily.
 - (c) It proves that they are like humans.
 - (d) It proves that they are similar to dogs.

4. Select the paragraph from the section “Dogs Can Read People” that describes the study conducted by the scientists on wolves.

Answer Key

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