

Do Mice Have A Will?

Do mice possess a will or do they merely act on instinct?

By Carol Lawton

Posted: January 13, 2009, 2:30 p.m. EDT

Q: I was wondering if mice have a will. If so, could you explain to me why or how a will exists in mice? If not, could you explain to me why or how they do not possess a will? I was also wondering if you would consider a dog to have a will, and if a mouse could be trained to do things like other animals are trained to do things. I would greatly appreciate any help you could offer!

A: This is a question that could be asked to a dozen different people and you would probably receive a dozen very different answers. However, I'll happily give you my personal opinion.

Dictionary.com defines "will" as the "power of choosing one's own actions." Based on that definition, I believe that mice do possess a will. But the choices made by mice are based on very different things than human choices.

In animals, particularly those that are low on the food chain, the will to survive plays a much stronger role than it does in larger mammals, and it governs many of their choices.

For example, two wild mice spot a plump, ripe berry on the ground, but their instincts, sense of smell and experience tell them a cat is nearby. Their "choice" is to satisfy their hunger and risk their life, or look for other food. For one of them, the need for food is so pressing that it takes the risk and grabs the berry. The other mouse, which has recently eaten, seeks for a safer food source.

For a larger domestic animal, such as your dog, the choices are very different because its food and housing needs are met. Without the need to focus on survival, a dog is free to spend its time socializing with its human or just playing. A dog's choices may include some personal preferences and may be swayed by training or by societal pressures if it is part of a multi-dog household.

As for training your pet mouse to do tasks or tricks, mice are willing subjects if you find the right treat or reward to motivate them.