Brian Hare, founder of Duke University's Canine Cognition Center, which researches the intelligence of dogs, knows his way around Fido's brain. Now he's sharing what your dog may be thinking about you in The Genius of Dogs: How Dogs Are Smarter Than You Think (Dutton), co-written with his wife, Vanessa Woods. USA TODAY's Craig Wilson was eager to ask him some questions.

Q: My dog, Maggie, a wheaten terrier, often just stares at me. What's she thinking?

A: That's one of the fun things we look at. When dogs are looking at us like that, it's creating a physiological change in us. There's an increase in oxytocin, the hug hormone. So by them staring at us, it creates a bonding response in the human owner. It's one of their superhero powers.

Q: She won't chase a ball, either. I think that makes her very smart, no?

A: If you think it makes her smart, I'm happy to say yes. That's one of the fun things about studying animals: It really turns on its head our normal definition of intelligence. There are clearly different kinds of intelligence.

My guess is she doesn't have the motivation to go chase balls. She has motivation to do something else that makes you happy. She has a different strategy, and that works great for her. And you.

Q: People always say standard poodles are the smartest dogs. Tell us that's not true.

A: (Laughs) What's a better tool? A hammer or a screwdriver? What are they designed for? If they're trying to say that (poodles are smarter) based on rigorous science, there's nothing that supports or contradicts them.

Q: "Dognition." Explain what it is.

A: The book is all about what we've learned in the past 10 years in dog psychology. It's about your dog. It's about applying all these new discoveries to your dog to understand its cognitive style. It helps you find your dog's genius.

Q: So, what fun game can we play with Maggie to evaluate her intelligence?

A: There are 10 games that measure five different kinds of intelligence, those being empathy, communication, cunning, memory and reasoning. The 10 games help you find out what strategies your dog uses. Wouldn't it be great to know, for instance, that your dog is really following your gestures and not its memory? Or vice versa?

Q: Dogs don't feel guilt? Like even after they have ripped the sofa apart?

A: (Our research) did not show any evidence of guilt. But based on the existing literature, when dogs are slinking away, it's not that they understand why you're angry that they tore the sofa apart, they're just responding to the fact they're in trouble. So we can be a little bit easier on them.

Q: You say dogs are lousy at physics?
A: You're walking your dog on a leash, and there's a lamppost coming. You're going to be wrapped around that lamppost if you rely on the dog. Or throwing a ball to him on a hill and he brings it back to the hill and it rolls down. He doesn't understand gravity.

Q: How do you know dogs can retain thousands of words?

A: The interesting finding there is that from a scientific standpoint, it's not amazing. What's amazing is how the dogs learned the words. They learned it through inferential reasoning, the same process kids learn words. You can put a dog in a room full of toys and put new ones in, and give the new ones odd names. The dog will bring back the toy it's never seen before because it's called by a name he's never heard before.

Q: Is the idea of the "alpha dog" a myth?

A: The alpha dog premise is based on the fact that dogs evolved from wolves, and that doesn't hold up. They don't have a dominant hierarchy. They don't follow the dominant animal. They follow the one with the most friends in the group.

We try to point out we need a cognitive approach to training. If you recognize what their strengths are and their biases, you'll be in a much better place. There's just not one size fits all.

Q: So we should always be photographed with a dog? We appear more trustworthy?

A: Absolutely! There's very good data on that. Hilarious stories on people trying to get dates. They got five times more with a dog with them. Every politician should be canvassing with a dog. They can kiss all the babies they want, but they should be taking a dog with them. If you want to fix Washington, get a dog.

Q: And finally, you can't judge a dog by his face?

A: Well, the problem is, you look at a dog and say it looks like a bull terrier, and it ends up a mix of 10 breeds with no bull terrier in it. And you can't predict behavior by appearance.

CAPTION(S):

photo Gretchen Mathison For authors Vanessa Woods and Brian Hare, it goes

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