mystery science

Grades K-5
Mini-Lesson: “Can a shark and a dolphin have babies?”

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

VIDEO 1

Hi, it's Doug! So this summer, my family and I got a cat. Now, I've always been a dog person. I wasn't so sure about this. But he's awesome. We love him. His name is Auggie, and we got him from a rescue shelter.

One of the things that I found interesting is that just like there are different kinds of dogs, there are also different kinds of cats. The rescue shelter we got him from thinks he's a mix—part Siamese, part tabby cat.

Well, someone named Nina has a question about a totally different kind of animal mix. Let's give her a call now.

[Video Call]
- Hi, Doug!
- Hi, Nina!
- I have a question for you. Can a shark and a dolphin have babies?
- Ooh, that's an interesting question.

What would we even call a shark-dolphin mix? A sholphin? A dark? This is fun to think about. I mean, both of them live in the ocean. They even have some similarities in their body shapes.

They both have fins, they both have these kinds of snout-like noses, and they're both such interesting creatures too.

It's fun to imagine what a shark-dolphin would be like. Would it be playful and friendly like so many dolphins, but just with ferocious teeth?

Since we're talking about this, it kind of makes you wonder about other animal combinations too. Like, could a dog and a cat have babies? And what would we call that—a cog, or a dat? What about a giraffe and a kangaroo—a girafferoo? A kangaraffe? Could they have babies?

Now, maybe you're thinking, no way! All these animals are just too different from one another. I mean, a dog and a cat? They're two totally different kinds of animals. There's just no such thing as an animal that's part dog, part cat.

But now wait a second. Because you might have seen or heard of dogs like this—this is a Labradoodle. It's part Labrador Retriever, part Poodle. Or this one—part Australian Shepherd, part Poodle. People call this an Aussiepoo. Retrievers, Poodles, and Australian Shepherds are all different kinds of dogs.

They look different from each other. So, is it possible for two different-looking animals to have babies?

VIDEO 2

Even though two different kinds of dogs, like a Bulldog or a Dalmatian, might look very different from each other, they're both dogs—and that's what really matters.

This is something scientists have thought a lot about. When people talk about different kinds of animals, scientists have noticed that sometimes people mean different things when they use that word, *kinds* of animals. For example, Dalmatians, Labradors, and Poodles are all different kinds of dogs. But scientists call those varieties because they're all still kinds of dogs—it's like they're just different versions of dogs. A dog itself, that's what scientists call a *species.* As long as two animals are the same species, they can have babies together.

So, a Dalmatian and a Bulldog? No problem. It's a bullmation. But a Dalmatian and a Siamese cat? Sorry to say, it just can't happen. Because cats are a totally different species from dogs. Cats and dogs are just too different from each other. For any of you who've heard of *DNA* before, this has to do with the fact that their DNA is what's too different.

So now what about a shark and a dolphin?

Well, even though they do have some things in common when you look really closely, you start to see some big differences. Sharks have gills—they're able to breathe underwater. Most of them lay eggs. They have a lot in common with fish.

Dolphins, on the other hand—they have to come up to the surface to breathe air. And when they have babies, they don't lay eggs. They give live birth to their young. They even give milk to their young. Sharks don't do anything like that. Dolphins aren't fish at all, they're mammals.

So, I'm sorry to say on the question of whether a shark and a dolphin could have babies together, the answer is no. No such thing could exist. Sharks and dolphins aren't the same species at all, not even close.

But in case you're disappointed, I can share with you something you might find interesting, or maybe even a little weird.

You see, even though two different species aren't supposed to be able to have babies, people have discovered that there are a few species of animals out there in the wild, which are just similar enough to each other that sometimes they can have babies together.

Like this—this is what's called a *coywolf.* It's a cross between a coyote and a wolf. Or check out this. Can you guess what this is? It's part Polar Bear, part Grizzly Bear. People call it a pizzly.

Okay, here's one more. While dolphins can't have babies with sharks, this one is part Bottlenose Dolphin, part False Killer Whale. It's called a wholphin. It turns out that a False Killer Whale is just similar enough to a Bottlenose Dolphin that even though they're different species, they do occasionally have babies together. It's just incredibly rare.

Now, what is going on with these examples?

Each of these animals are technically different species from each other. Polar Bears are considered a different species from Grizzly Bears. But should they be? I mean, if they can have babies together, wouldn't that make them the same species? That's a good question and one that scientists sometimes debate.

Here's the thing though. All of these babies, like pizzlies or wholphins, usually, once they grow up, have trouble producing babies themselves. That's one reason why scientists do still think of things like Polar Bears and Grizzly Bears to be different species.

So in summary, if you want to know whether two different-looking animals can have babies, usually you can tell just by finding out whether they're the same species. But there are some interesting exceptions to this. It's not always true.

That's all for this week's question. Thanks, Nina, for asking it!