



Top Ten Dog Behavior Myths

#1: Dogs are naturally pack animals with a clear social order.

This one falls apart immediately, because all the evidence suggests that free-ranging dogs (pariahs, feral and semi-feral populations) don't form packs. Dogs actually form loose, amorphous, transitory associations with other dogs. And males do not participate in the rearing of young as occurs in a wolf pack.

#2: If you let dogs exit doorways ahead of you, you're letting them be dominant.

There is not only no evidence for this, there is no evidence that the behavior of going through a doorway has any social significance *whatsoever*. In order to lend this idea any plausibility, it would first need to be ruled out that rapid doorway exit is not simply a function of their motivation to get to whatever is on the other side combined with their higher ambulation speed. Dogs walk faster than us.

#3: In multi-dog households, “support the hierarchy” by giving presumed dominant animals patting, treats etc. first, before giving to presumed subordinate animals.

There is no evidence that this has any impact on inter-dog relations, or any type of aggression. In fact, if one dog were being aggressive toward another, the laws governing Pavlovian conditioning would dictate an opposite strategy: Teach aggressive dogs that another dog receiving scarce resources *predicts* that *they* are about to receive some. If so practiced, the aggressive dog develops a happy emotional response to other dogs getting stuff, a helpful piece of training indeed. No valuable conditioning effects are achieved by giving to the presumed higher ranking dog goodies first.

#4: Dogs have an innate desire to please.

This is a concept that has never been operationally defined, let alone tested. A vast preponderance of evidence, however, suggests that dogs, like all properly functioning animals, are motivated by food, water, sex, and like many animals, by play and access to bonded relationships, especially after an absence. They are also, like all animals, motivated by fear and pain and these are the inevitable tools of those who eschew the use of food, play etc., however much they cloak their coercion and collar tightening in desire to please rhetoric. So when a trainer says s/he is relying on this, make sure it's not code for some sort of metal collar.

#5: Rewards are bribes and thus compromise relationships.

Related to #4, the idea that behavior should just, in the words of Susan Friedman, PhD, “flow like a fountain” without need of consequences, is opposed by more than sixty years of unequivocal evidence that behavior is, again to quote Friedman, “a tool to produce consequences.” Another problem is that bribes are given before behavior and rewards after. And, a mountain of evidence from decades of research in pure and applied settings has demonstrated over and over that positive reinforcement – i.e. reward – makes relationships better, never worse.

#6: If you pat your dog when he's afraid, you're rewarding the fear.

Fear is an emotional state, a reaction to the presence or anticipation of something highly aversive. It is not an attempt at manipulation. If terrorists enter a bank and order everybody down on the floor, the people will exhibit fearful behavior. If I then give one of the bank customers on the floor a compliment, twenty bucks or chocolates is this going to make them *more afraid of terrorists next time*? It's stunningly narcissistic to imagine that a dog's fearful behavior is somehow directed at us (along with his door dashing).

#7: Punish dogs for growling or else they'll become aggressive.

Dogs growl because something that is upsetting them is too close. If you punish them for informing us of this, they are still upset but now not letting us know, thus allowing scary things to get closer and possibly end up bitten. Ian Dunbar calls this "removing the ticker from the time bomb." Much better to make the dog comfortable around what he's growling at so he's not motivated to make it go away in the first place.

#8: Playing tug makes dogs aggressive.

There is no evidence that this is so. The only study ever done found no correlation between playing tug and the incidence of aggression directed at either family members or strangers. Tug is, in fact, a cooperative behavior directed at simulated prey: the toy.

#9: If you give dogs chew toys, they'll learn to chew everything.

This is a Pandora's Box type of argument that has zero evidence to support it. Dogs are excellent discriminators and readily learn to distinguish their toys from forbidden items with minimal training. The argument is also logically flawed as chewing is a behavior that waxes and wanes depending on satiation/deprivation. Dogs without chew objects are like zoo animals in barren cages. Unless there is good compensation with other enrichment activities, there is actually a welfare issue.

#10: You can't modify "genetic" behavior.

All behavior is a product of an interplay between genes and the environment. And while some behaviors require less learning than others, or no learning at all, their modifiability varies as much as does the modifiability of behaviors that are primarily learned.

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