

Top Ten Dog Behavior Myths

#1: DOGS ARE NATURALLY PACK ANIMALS WITH A CLEAR SOCIAL ORDER

This one falls apart immediately upon scrutiny, 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.

#2: IF DOGS EXIT DOORWAYS AHEAD OF YOU, THEY'RE DOMINANT

There is not only no evidence for this, there is no evidence that going through doorways has any social significance to dogs whatsoever. In order to lend this idea plausibility, one would need to rule out the possibility that rapid doorway exit is simply a function of a dog's motivation to get to whatever is on the other side, combined with their higher speed. Dogs walk faster than we do.

#3: IN MULTI-DOG HOUSEHOLDS, "SUPPORT THE HIERARCHY" BY GIVING "DOMINANT" DOGS TREATS FIRST, BEFORE GIVING TO "SUBORDINATE" DOGS

There is no evidence that this has any impact on inter-dog relations, or any type of aggression. In fact, 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 the presumed higher-ranking dog goodies first.

#4: DOGS HAVE AN INNATE DESIRE TO PLEASE

This concept 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 and sex. Like many other animals, they are also motivated by play and access to bonded relationships, especially after an absence. They are also, like all animals, motivated by fear and pain—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

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 PET YOUR DOG WHEN HE'S AFRAID, YOU'RE REWARDING THE FEAR

Fear is an emotional state: a reaction to 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?

#7: PUNISH DOGS FOR GROWLING OR THEY'LL BECOME AGGRESSIVE

Dogs growl because something upsetting is too close. If you punish them for informing us, 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 learn to distinguish their toys from forbidden items with minimal training. The argument is also logically flawed, since the desire to chew waxes and wanes depending on satiation/deprivation. Dogs without chew objects are like zoo animals in barren cages. Unless there are 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.