

## Fairy tales The Top 10 dog behaviour myths

There are a lot of myths about dog behaviour so I whittled it down to ones that were pervasive and that made myth criteria, which are:

- a) there is no (zero) scientific evidence supporting the contention;
- b) there is scientific evidence against the contention and/or scientific evidence supporting alternatives.

1) Dogs are naturally pack animals with a clear social order. This one busts coming out of the gate as free-ranging dogs (pariahs, semi-feral populations, dingoes, etc.) don't form packs. As someone who spent years solemnly repeating that dogs were pack animals, it was sobering to find out that dogs form loose, amorphous, transitory associations with other dogs.

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 behaviour of going through a doorway has any social significance whatsoever. In order to lend this idea any plausibility, it would 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.

3) In multi-dog households, "support the hierarchy" by giving presumed dominant animals patting, treats, etc., first, before giving the same attention 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 roughing up another, the laws governing Pavlovian conditioning would dictate an opposite tack: Teach aggressive dogs that other dogs receiving scarce resources predicts that they are about to receive some. If so practiced, the tough 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, sex, and like many animals, by play and access to bonded relationships, especially after an absence. They're 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.

5) Rewards are bribes and thus compromise relationships. Related to 4), the idea that behaviour should just, in the words of Susan Friedman, Ph.D., "flow like a fountain" without need of consequences, is opposed by more than 60 years of unequivocal evidence that behaviour is, again to quote Friedman, "a tool to produce consequences." Another problem is that bribes are given before

behaviour, and rewards are given 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., rewards – make 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 behaviour. If I then give a bank customer on the floor a compliment, 20 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 behaviour is somehow directed at us (along with his enthusiastic door-dashing).

7) Punish dogs for growling or else they'll become aggressive. Ian Dunbar calls this "removing the ticker from the time bomb." Dogs growl because something 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. Much better to make the dog comfortable around what he's growling at so he's not motivated to make it go away.

8) Playing tug makes dogs aggressive. There is no evidence that this is so. The only study ever done, by Borchelt and Goodloe, found no correlation between playing tug and the incidence of aggression directed at either family members or strangers. Tug is, in fact, a cooperative behaviour 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, once again, has zero evidence to support it. Dogs are excellent discriminators and readily learn with minimal training to distinguish their toys from forbidden items. The argument is also logically flawed as chewing is a 'hydraulic' behaviour that waxes and wanes, depending on satiation/deprivation, as does drinking, eating and sex. Dogs without chew objects are like zoo animals in barren cages. Unless there is good compensation with other enrichment activities, there is a welfare issue here.

10) You can't modify "genetic" behaviour. All behaviour – and I mean all – is a product of a complex interplay between genes and the environment. And while some behaviours require less learning than others, or no learning at all, their modifiability varies as much as does the modifiability of behaviours that are primarily learned.

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