



What are Some of the Common Myths About Dog Training?



With the wide variety of dog trainers available and the differing skills and educational levels, you will no doubt encounter a diverse set of opinions when talking to trainers, reading their web sites and getting opinions from former clients, friends, and others. While the internet has been a great tool for education, it also has helped to propagate many myths about dog training. Here's some of the common ones that you may hear in your search for a trainer.

MYTH: If a dog can't learn a behavior, he is either stubborn, dominant, stupid, or a combination of the three.

REALITY: The truth is, dogs in many ways are just like people. Some dogs will pick things up very quickly and others will take more time and guidance. Often times when we as trainers see a dog having difficulty learning a task, it's because the dog is not being communicated to in a way that the dog can understand. Other times they fail to learn a task because they are not properly instructed as to when they've done the behavior correctly and therefore have no way of knowing what you are asking of them. Always reward your dog for doing something right and use patience when demonstrating a desired behavior. If your dog still seems to have trouble learning something new, think about how you've been teaching the dog from the "dog's point of view." Think about how certain behaviors may not be as clearly taught as you thought they were, or if there are elements in the environment that might be causing your dog to become confused or distracted. Is the behavior too complex and perhaps needs to be broken up into smaller steps? Another possibility to consider is whether the dog is capable of physically learning a certain behavior - for example, a dog that has hip problems might find certain positions like "sit" uncomfortable.

MYTH: My dog knows he did something wrong because he looks guilty.

REALITY: Guilt is a human emotion and whether animals feel emotions in the same way that humans do is subject to a great deal of debate among scientists! However, in terms of the "guilty look," a recent study at Barnard College in New York found that the "guilty" look people claim to see in their animals is entirely attributable to whether or not the person expected to see the look, regardless of whether or not their dog had actually done something to be "guilty" about. When a dog looks "guilty" it is because they are reacting to a change in our body language that tells them "something is wrong" and leads to body language on their part that "looks" worried and nervous to the human eye. In reality the dog has learned to exhibit these behaviors in order to appease humans who display angry or upset body language.

MYTH: A puppy has to be at least six months old to be trained.

REALITY: This myth originated from "old school" training where heavy collar corrections were used and therefore it was preferred that a dog be at least old enough to withstand wearing the collar and dealing with the pressure of collar corrections and punishment during training sessions. With today's modern methods of training based on positive reinforcement and cooperation with your dog, there is no reason you can't start working with your puppy as soon as you can! A puppy starts learning the moment they are able to observe and relate to their environment. Unlike an adult dog, a puppy may have a shorter attention span and this will require more patience when teaching behaviors, but there is no reason your puppy can't start learning right away, and the sooner you start, the quicker your puppy will learn. It's important to socialize your puppy as soon as possible as well to expose him to new people and things so he'll grow up to be a behaviorally healthy and confident adult dog.

MYTH: That "positive reinforcement" training only works with small/happy/regular dogs, not tough/large/obstinate/stubborn dogs.

REALITY: Using positive reinforcement primarily to train animals is the norm among exotic animal and marine mammal trainers. If you can train a large predator such as a killer whale or a tiger through concentrating on rewarding behaviors, there is no reason you can't do the same with your dog regardless of his breed. Moreover, as our knowledge of behavior is strengthened through research, the consensus is that using aversive training methods on fearful or aggressive dogs is more likely to lead to worse behaviors, whereas focusing on rewarding the animal and alleviating their fears and anxieties leads to more well-adjusted dogs and stronger human-animal relationships.

MYTH: My dog pulls on leash because he's dominant, or, my dog jumps on me because he's dominant, or my dog lays on the couch because he's dominant, or my dog won't let me clip his nail because he's dominant, etc.

REALITY: The concept of "dominance" has been used to explain just about every inappropriate behavior in dogs that owners can possibly complain about. The problem is, the term dominance as is used by most dog owners today, and unfortunately some trainers still, is completely incorrect. Dominance describes a social relationship between two or more individuals. It is NOT a character trait. Despite what many people believe, dogs do not spend their time seeking to establish control over humans. If a dog jumps on you, it's because he has not learned that this is an undesirable behavior. If he pulls on leash, he hasn't been taught that he should walk closely beside you. If he doesn't like being groomed, he most likely finds the brush and clippers uncomfortable or scary or both. The moral of the story is, if your dog is doing something you don't like, forget about worrying about "dominance." Instead decide what it is you want your dog to do instead, and then proceed to teach him that and reward him for doing it right.

MYTH: Using food in training is bribery.

REALITY: While food can certainly be used to “bribe” a dog, the above sentence displays a fundamental lack of understanding of the laws of learning theory. When you are teaching an animal—any animal, including humans!—something new, there needs to be a motivation for “getting it right” and a signal that you’ve done so (a reward, or more correctly, a “reinforcement”) In humans, this could be an A+ from a teacher, or a paycheck or bonus from your job! All animals “work” for reinforcements and dogs are no different. Trainers often use food simply because most dogs love food and find it worth working for, but we also can use toys, play, work, petting, happy talk and a whole variety of other things to reward our dogs. A reward/reinforcement is something that is presented to an animal in order to show them they got something right. A bribe is something that you give to an animal to get them to do something they already know how to do.

MYTH: Using head collars will cause neck/spinal injury.

REALITY: This is an oft-repeated claim that can be found all over the Internet. In fact there are no documented cases of dogs getting neck and/or spinal injuries from head collars. Proper use of these types of collars should have no ill physical effects on your dog.

MYTH: I heard my dog should work for me only because he wants to please me.

REALITY: Dogs do what they do ultimately because it works for them. As humans we can count ourselves incredibly lucky to have such creatures that appear to enjoy our company and share our lives. However, we need to understand that this is a mutual relationship, and dogs benefit from their relationships with us through getting food, shelter, play, and affection, among other things. Therefore when a dog does something that makes us happy, we shouldn’t jump to the assumption that a dog “only wants to please us” —they are doing things to make us happy because it also gets them a treat or a belly rub or a pleasant environment to be in. If you subscribe to the theory of mind that a dog only should do things to please you and never be rewarded or reinforced for doing what you want, you will most likely find yourself with a dog that is difficult to train because he will have a hard time discerning when he’s done something right without any reward history from you.

MYTH: If you adopt an older dog, it won’t bond to you or learn new behaviors and how to live with a new family because “an old dog can’t learn new tricks.”

REALITY: You can train a dog, or any animal for that matter, at any age. However, keep in mind that the older an animal is and the longer they may have had rehearsed a behavior that you may now want to change. Because of this it may take a little longer to change that behavior. On the other hand, in some ways training an older dog can be easier than training a puppy. Older dogs are generally calmer than young puppies and in turn have better focus and attention when working with you.

MYTH: My dog is urinating in the house because he’s angry that I left him alone.

REALITY: If your dog is urinating in the house, it can only be for one of a few possible reasons: 1) He has a medical condition such as a urinary tract infection or 2) He is suffering from extreme separation anxiety and is in distress. 3) You left him alone longer than you can reasonably expect your dog to hold his bladder. 4) He is not fully housetrained. Dogs are simply not capable of the type of thought processes that would allow them to think that doing an action such as urinating in the house will get back at you for a perceived slight, no matter how much we’d like to believe that’s the case! If your dog isn’t fully housetrained, sometimes it’s easier to go back and start at the beginning as if he is still a young puppy and make sure you are absolutely consistent about supervising him in the house and rewarding him for going outside. Sometimes changes like moving to a new house can trigger confusion for your dog too. As a precaution you should take him to a veterinarian to rule out possible medical causes.

MYTH: You should never play tug of war because this creates aggression.

REALITY: Tug of war can be a great game to play with your dog as long as you do it properly! Dogs should learn that it’s never ok to put their teeth on your skin when grasping for the toy with their mouths, and they should learn to “drop” the toy on command when you’re ready to end the game. Using tug as a reinforcer instead of food is actually very common among many dog sports competitors and working dog trainers because dogs enjoy it so much!

MYTH: I shouldn’t use food to train because then I will always need food in hand to get my dog to do something.

REALITY: Your dog will only look for food in your hand in the future IF you do not fade out the food lures quickly.

MYTH: Using people food in training will make my dog beg at the table.

REALITY: Feeding your dog from the dining table will cause your dog to beg at the table, whether you feed the dog food from your own plate or from a bag of dog kibble. If you don’t want your dog to beg while you’re eating, teach him a “go to your place” command to show him that he needs to go hang out somewhere else in the house while you’re enjoying a meal.

MYTH: Dogs are descendents of wolves and therefore training should be based on how wolf packs interact with each other.

REALITY: Dogs are not wolves and there are many significant differences between dog and wolf behavior such that wolf behavior is completely irrelevant to how we live and interact with our dogs. Moreover, when wolf behavior is mentioned as a model for dog training, the understanding of wolf behavior used is often incorrect and based on studies that have long since been disproven by research scientists who study wolves extensively.

For more information on the Association of Professional Dog Trainers, visit our Web site at www.apdt.com or call 1-800-PET-DOGS (738-3647) or email information@apdt.com.