

6 Myths That Can Scare and Confuse Your Pet (or Worse)

November 07, 2016

Story at-a-glance

- **Many long-held beliefs about dogs are actually myths**
- **It's a myth that you can't teach an old dog new tricks or that letting your well-trained dog on the couch will teach her she's the boss**
- **Other common myths include the notion that rubbing your dog's nose in a potty accident is a good idea or that you should let two fighting dogs "fight it out"**

By Dr. Becker

Our canine companions grace our lives with loyalty, companionship and unconditional love, and in return we owe it to them to try and understand their needs, nuances and behaviors.

This not only makes for a deeper [bond between you and your dog](#), but also it makes for a more mutually enjoyable relationship. One of the first steps to reaching new levels of understanding is letting go of some pervasive myths about dog behavior.

You may think you know it all about why your dog acts a certain way and what he's capable of, but keep on reading — you may be surprised to learn that some of

your long-held beliefs about canines are actually nothing but myths.[1](#)

6 Common Dog Behavior Myths

Myth #1: You Can't Teach an Old Dog New Tricks

While it's true that older dogs may become more irritable and even have personality changes (which are often linked to health problems, like pain) as they age, they are very much able to continue to learn.

In one study of border collies ranging in age from 5 months to 13 years, the older dogs were capable of learning a challenging new task, although they did it more slowly than the younger dogs.[2](#)**However, the older dogs actually performed better than younger dogs at logical reasoning tasks.**

Not to mention, learning new tricks is one of the best strategies to help keep your aging dog's brain young. Mental stimulation (puzzles and treat-release toys), as well as plenty of opportunity to socialize with other pets and people, is also important for ongoing cognitive health.

Myth #2: Letting Your Dog on Your Couch Will Teach Her She Can Do Whatever She Wants

It's often said that letting a dog snuggle up on your bed or couch tells your dog that she's the dominant one. And while puppies and untrained adult dogs may try to reach higher locations in a show of dominance, there's no reason to think your well-trained dog (who understands and respects the "off" command, if

needed) is trying to be dominant by wanting to be by you.

Sometimes your dog may just like the soft feel of your couch better than the hard floor or realizes you often have a “free hand” for petting while sitting on the couch.

In adult and older dogs that have already established a pack order in your household (including with you), there’s no reason to shun them from your cozy couch out of the outdated belief that you’ll no longer be the “boss” (unless of course you’re protecting your couch from dog hair!).

Myth #3: Rubbing Your Dog’s Nose in a Potty Accident Will Teach Him It’s Wrong

This is completely untrue, and will probably backfire, big time. Punishing your dog by rubbing his nose in an accident, or yelling at your dog for the mistake, will not teach him appropriate behaviors; it will only confuse him, scare him and possibly make the problem worse.

Your pet won’t make the connection between the accident and why you’re angry, adding to the scary element of the punishment. This may encourage him to run and hide when he needs to eliminate instead of letting you know.

There are many reasons why dogs have accidents indoors — submission, excitement, marking, medical problems and more. It’s important to get to the bottom of [why your dog is having accidents](#) in order to properly address the problem.

Fortunately, this isn't an issue you have to simply learn to live with because, in most cases, your dog can

be taught to stop urinating in the house and/or it can be resolved with proper medical treatment or behavioral training.

Myth #4: You Should Let Dogs ‘Fight It Out’

If you see two of your [dogs fighting](#), should you simply let them continue and solve the problem themselves? Most often not — however you shouldn’t typically attempt to put yourself in between two fighting dogs, as you might get hurt.

Depending on the level of the fight and your willingness to intervene, you can try to separate the dogs by grabbing their rear ends and quickly pulling them away from each other.

You can also use your foot to push away the rib cage of one dog (do not kick the dog, simply use your foot to put space in between the two fighting dogs).

You can also try to stop the fight using distraction techniques, such as a loud noise or even opening a bag of treats. Other distraction techniques to break up a dog fight include:

Placing a board or other object between them	Spraying the dogs with water
Banging a noisy object near	Using an aversive spray like

them; blowing an air horn	citronella (brand name Direct Stop™)
Tossing a blanket over one or both dogs	Quickly inviting one of the dogs to go for a walk or a ride in the car
Lightly popping one or both dogs on the top of the head with a newspaper or magazine	Ringing the doorbell or opening a door to the outside (if you have a fenced in backyard)

Myth #5: Using Treats to Train Your Dog Will Teach Her to Only Respond to Treats

Healthy treats are an excellent [positive training tool](#) because most dogs are food-motivated. When you

want a dog to perform a desired behavior, rewarding him immediately with a treat teaches and reinforces the behavior.

Once your dog learns the desired behavior, you can gradually back off the treats and use them only intermittently. Eventually, you'll be able to transition to just praising your dog verbally for the behavior, although it doesn't hurt to offer a treat reward every once in awhile as well.

Myth #6: Dogs Are Only Happy Running Off Leash

While many dogs do enjoy running freely, in some situations this poses safety risks that could put your pet's life in danger, depending on their level of recall and the environmental risk factors of the situation. If you have access to a fenced area where your dog can safely roam, or you are in a [safe open space](#) and you know your dog will come back to you when called, you can allow your dog to enjoy running off leash. If not, your pet will still enjoy going for long walks (or runs) on a leash.

Want to Learn Even More About What Makes Your Dog Tick?

There are many ways you can gain increased understanding about your dog's behavior and methods of communication. For instance, simply observing your dog's tail can reveal many clues about her emotional state:

- A tail held high is a sign of confidence or alertness. The dog will release more of her scent from her

anal glands this way, thus making her presence known

- A tail held high and wagging is often a sign of happiness (with a relaxed facial expression)**
- A tail held horizontal to the ground can mean your dog is exploring**
- A dog that tucks her tail between her legs or wags it low to the ground and quickly may be showing you that she's nervous, anxious, insecure or feeling shy (the tucked-in position also prevents her scent from being released)**

Dogs can also be identified by their barks and bark differently in different contexts, essentially producing a variety of bark subtypes that may act as specific forms of communication. For many pet owners, simply observing their dog closely will reveal whether he's hungry, lonely or excited to play.

If, however, you need help identifying what your dog is trying to tell you or why he's displaying a certain behavior, a professional holistic dog behaviorist can help to open the lines of communication for you.