

Mythbusting

By Pat Miller



Hang with dog folks long enough and you're sure to hear some pretty interesting theories about dog behavior. Some are, of course, useful and accurate, but the dog training world is littered with myths, many of which are at least several generations old. Some of them are just silly; some have the potential for causing serious damage to the dog-human relationship; and still others are downright dangerous. It's time to get past the myths.

I am always exhorting my interns, apprentices and clients to be critical thinkers. When someone offers you a nugget of alleged canine wisdom, regardless of who the someone is, you're wise to run it through your own rigorous filters before accepting it as real wisdom. These should include:

- The scientific filter. Does it make sense scientifically? If someone assures you that shock collar training is actually positive reinforcement training because the shock is no different than someone tapping you on the shoulder to get you to stop a behavior, does that concur with your understanding of positive reinforcement? (Dog's behavior makes a good thing happen – behavior increases.) Don't be fooled by the euphemisms "e-collar" and "tingle," "tap," or "stim" for the word "shock."
- The philosophical filter. Is it congruent with your own philosophies about dog training and relationships? Positive punishment (dog's behavior makes a bad thing happen; behavior decreases) makes sense scientifically. That still doesn't mean you want to – or have to – use it with your dog, and risk the damage it can do to your relationship. Trainers with a positive training philosophy generally try to avoid the use of positive punishment, or any methods that work through the use of fear, pain, aversives and avoidance.
- The "acid test" filter. It may seem sound scientifically, and it may feel okay philosophically – but does it work? If you're comfortable trying it out and you don't like the results, feel free to continue on and explore why it's not working or simply toss it out. Just because it works for someone else doesn't mean it has to work for you.

Veterinary Behaviorist Dr. Lore Haug of Sugar Land, Texas, recently compiled a comprehensive list of dog behavior myths. With her blessing, we're sharing our top ten "favorites" here with you:

Myth #1:

"Puppies should not go to puppy classes/the mall/friends' houses until they have had all their vaccinations at 16 weeks/6 months of age." (Fails all three tests)

This one lands squarely at the top of the "dangerous myth" category. It's generally perceived as credible by new puppy owners because it's often offered by the pup's veterinarian. While it appears scientifically sound on its face (unvaccinated puppy at risk for contracting deadly diseases!), puppies who aren't properly socialized are at a much greater risk for developing behavior problems, including aggression, that are likely to shorten their lives. The vet is right on one hand – the best way to ensure that your pup isn't exposed to dog germs is to avoid other dogs. However, while it's certainly true that you want to prevent your pup's exposure to unknown and/or possibly unhealthy dogs (and their waste), it is critically important that your pup get lots of exposure to the rest of the world, including healthy puppies in a controlled environment, before the critical socialization period ends at 12-16 weeks – or risk serious, sometimes deadly, behavior problems.

In addition, during the period leading up to 4-6 months, your pup has protection from his mother's immunities, and is receiving "puppy shots" to cover that period of time when his mother's protection starts to decrease. Not only is it "okay" to take your pup places while exercising reasonable caution, you have an obligation to provide him with extensive socialization in order to maximize his chances of leading a long and happy life.

Myth #2:

"Dogs pull on leash, jump up on people, (add your own) because they are dominant." (Fails scientific and philosophical tests)

This one can be dangerous too, as it encourages dog owners to use forceful methods to assert their own status over their "dominant" dogs. No one disputes that dogs living in a group understand and respond to the concepts and dictates of a social hierarchy. The fact that canine social structure shares elements with human social structure is probably one of the reasons they make such wonderful companions for us. However, current thinking in behavior communities is that social hierarchies are much more based on deference than dominance, and that most canine behavior that many misguided humans attribute to dominance – isn't.

A dog's goal in life is to make good stuff happen. Behaviors often labeled "dominant" because they are perceived as pushy and assertive – like pulling on leash and jumping up – simply persist because the dog has learned that the behaviors are reinforced; they make good stuff happen. Pulling on leash gets her where she wants to go. Jumping up gets attention. They have nothing to do with social status. Behaviors that are reinforced continue, and even increase. If you remove all reinforcement for the unwelcome behaviors (pulling makes us stop; jumping up makes attention go away) and reinforce more appropriate behaviors in their place, the behaviors will change.

Myth #3:

If you let your dog sleep on the bed/eat first/go through doors first/win at tug-o-war, he will become the alpha. (Fails all three tests)

This one is mostly just silly. Some sources even suggest that the entire family must gather in the kitchen and each person butter and eat a cracker before the dog can be fed. Seriously.

See Myth #2 for the mythbusting response to this one. If you don't want your dog on the furniture that's your lifestyle choice, but you don't need to defend it with the alpha-garbage argument. I feed my dogs before I eat so I don't have to feel guilty about them being hungry while I fill my own belly. I teach my dogs to sit-and-wait for permission to go through the door ("say please!") because it's a polite, safe behavior and reinforces deference, but not because I'm terrified that they'll take over the house. And I like to win tug-o-war a lot because it reinforces polite behavior. You can quit worrying about your dog becoming alpha just because you don't rule with an iron first.

Myth #4:

Dogs can't learn from positive reinforcement. You have to punish them so they know when they are wrong. (Fails scientific and philosophical tests; fails acid test unless punisher is very skilled.)

This myth has good potential for causing serious harm to the canine-human relationship. Research confirms what positive trainers hold dear: that positive reinforcement training is more effective and has far fewer risks than positive reinforcement training combined with positive punishment. One study was conducted by scientists at the University of Southampton in the UK and the University of Life Sciences in Norway. This study evaluated whether punishment was a contributor to behavior problems, and the affects of reward, punishment, and rule structure (permissiveness/strictness and consistency) on training and behavior problems. Information was collected via questionnaires from 217 dog guardians. Those who used strong and/or frequent punishment had a significantly higher level of training problems and lower obedience in their dogs. A similar study, conducted at the University of Bristol, in the UK, also found that dogs trained only with positive reinforcement exhibited fewer problem behaviors.

For most humans, this makes sense. Do you learn better if someone acknowledges (and rewards) you when you do it right, or slaps you upside-the-head when you do it wrong? Even if you get rewarded for doing it right, if you also get slapped for doing it wrong, your fear of getting slapped will likely impede your learning and make you more reluctant to try things.

Of course, a good positive training program makes use of management to avoid giving the dog opportunities to be reinforced for unwanted behaviors, and will also make judicious use of negative punishment (dog's behavior makes a good thing go away) to let him know he made an unrewarding behavior choice.

Myth #5:

"If you use treats to train, you will always need them." (Fails all three tests)

This one's silly. It just ain't so. A good positive training program will quickly fade the use of food as a constant reinforcer while moving to a schedule of intermittent reinforcement and expanding the repertoire of reinforcers to include things like toys, play, petting, praise and the opportunity to perform some other highly reinforcing behavior. Treats can be a very high-value reinforcer and quite useful in training a wide variety of behaviors, so it's plain silly to turn your back on them. Just be sure to fade food lures quickly in a training program, move to an intermittent schedule of reinforcement when your dog will perform a behavior on cue 8 out of 10 times, and incorporate a variety of reinforcers so you're never dependent on any one particular reward choice.

Myth #6:

"He urinates inside/destroys the house/barks when we leave him alone because he is spiteful." (Fails the scientific and philosophical tests)

This myth definitely causes harm to the dog-human relationship. Dogs don't do things out of spite, and to think so gives owners a negative perspective on their relationship with their canine family member. Dogs do things because they feel good, they work to make good stuff happen (or to make bad stuff go away) and they do things because they are reacting to events that occur in their environment. While our dogs share much the same range of emotions as we humans, they don't seem to indulge in all the same motives. Spite requires a certain amount of premeditation and cognitive thinking that science doesn't support as being very present in the canine behavior repertoire.

There are two rational explanations for the behaviors described in this myth. The first is that the dog isn't fully housetrained and hasn't yet learned house manners. In the absence of direct supervision, the dog urinates when he has a full bladder (an empty bladder feels good) and becomes destructive because playing with/chewing sofa cushions, shoes, ripping down curtains, tipping over the garbage and barking are fun and rewarding activities.

The other is that the dog suffers from some degree of isolation distress. These behaviors are often a manifestation of stress and the dog's attempt to relieve his anxiety over being left alone.

Myth #7:

"If you feed a dog human food, he will learn to beg at the table." (Fails all three tests)

Silly, silly, silly. One dog owner's "begging" is another's "attention" behavior, eagerly sought after and highly valued. Behaviors that are reinforced continue/increase. If you don't want your dog to beg at the table, don't feed your dog from the table. If you fed your dog his own dog food from the table, he would learn to beg at the table.

Human-grade food is better for dogs than much of the junk that's in many brands of dog food. Whether it's fed in a form that we recognize as something we might consume, or it's been transformed into something that more resembles our mental concept of "dog food," it all still comes from the same basic food ingredients. In fact, when I open a can of Merrick's "Grammy's Pot Pie for my dogs, with chicken, red jacket new potatoes, carrots, snow peas and red apples, I often think, "I could eat this!" (Except I'm vegetarian.) Looks like "human food" to me...

Myth #8:

He knows he was bad/did wrong because he looks guilty. (Fails all three tests)

This myth is damaging to the relationship, as it leads owners to hold dogs to a moral standard that they aren't capable of possessing. When a dog looks "guilty," he is most likely responding to a human's tense or angry body language with appeasement behaviors. He's probably thinking something like, "I don't know why, but my human looks pretty upset right now. I'd better offer some appeasement behaviors so her anger isn't directed at me!" Even when the "guilty" expression is a direct and immediate result of your dog's behavior because your punishment was timely – "Hey! Get out of the garbage!" – your dog's turned head, lowered body posture, averted eyes – are simply an acknowledgement of your anger and his attempt to reconcile with you.

A trainer friend of mine once did an experiment to convince a client that her dearly held "guilty look" belief was a myth. He had the client hold her dog in the living room while he went into the kitchen and dumped the garbage can on the floor, stewing its contents nicely around the room. Then he had the client bring the dog into the kitchen. Sure enough, the dog "acted guilty" even though he had nothing to do with the garbage on the floor. He just knew from past experience that "garbage on floor" turned his owner into an angry human, and he was already offering appeasement behavior in anticipation of her anger, and to divert her ire from his dog-self.

Myth #9:

The prong collar works by mimicking a mother dog's teeth and her corrections. (Fails the scientific and philosophical tests)

It's a little daunting to think that people actually believe this. It would be silly if it weren't so potentially damaging to the relationship, and potentially dangerous as well. The prong collar works because the prongs pressing into the dog's neck are uncomfortable at best, painful at worst. Because dogs will work to avoid pain and discomfort, the prong collar does work to stop a dog from pulling on the leash, and can shut down other undesirable behaviors as well, at least temporarily. However, like all training tools and techniques that are based on pain and intimidation, there is a significant risk of unintended consequences.

In the case of the prong collar, the primary risk is that the dog will associate the pain with something in his environment at the time he feels it, and this can lead to aggression toward the mistakenly identified cause. A dog's unmannerly, "I want to greet you" lunge toward another dog or person can turn into, "I want to eat you," if he decides that the object of his attentions is hurting him.

Myth #10:

"Aggressive/hand-shy/fearful dogs must have been abused at some point in their lives." (Fails the scientific test)

This is a very widespread myth – I hear it so often it makes my brain hurt. Fortunately, while the behaviors described in this myth are problematic, the myth itself may be the most benign of our top ten.

There are many reasons a dog may be aggressive, hand-shy or fearful. Lack of proper socialization tops the list, especially for fearfulness: if a pup doesn't get a wide variety of positive social exposures and experiences during the first 12-14 weeks of his life, he's likely to be neophobic – afraid of new things – for the rest of his life (See Myth #1). This neophobia manifests as fear, and for some dogs, as fear-related aggression.

Widely accepted categories of aggression include:

- Defensive (fear-related) aggression
- Possession aggression (resource guarding)
- Maternal aggression
- Territorial aggression
- Status-related aggression
- Pain-related aggression
- Protection aggression
- Predatory aggression
- Play aggression
- Idiopathic (we don't know what causes it) aggression

Note that there's no category for "abuse-related" aggression. Abuse can be one of several causes of fear-related/defensive aggression, but is much less common than the fear-related aggression that results from undersocialization.

Regardless of the cause of a dog's fearful or aggressive behavior, a myth-corollary to our Myth #10 is that love alone will be enough to "fix" the problem. While love is a vital ingredient for the most successful dog-human relationships, it takes far more than that to help a fearful dog to become confident, or an aggressive one to become friendly.

What You Can Do

1. Put your currently-held dog beliefs through your myth-filter to see if they stand up to scrutiny.
2. Do the same with any new dog behavior and training theories that your friends and animal-care professionals offer to you, as well as those you read, see on television or find on the Internet.
3. Gently help your dog loving friends become critical thinkers and encourage them examine their own closely-held dog beliefs.

Pat Miller has been training dogs for over 35 years and she's also the author of *The Power of Positive Dog Training* (2001), *Positive Perspectives* (2004), *Positive Perspectives 2* (2008) and her most recent release *Play With Your Dog* (2008). Pat is also Training Editor for *The Whole Dog Journal* and is a highly respected and sought after speaker on her positive reinforcement and reward training. www.peaceablepaws.com

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