

10 life-threatening behavior myths in dogs

Do you think puppy classes pose health risks? Does your dog seem to act angry with you? Do you punish your dog? If so, read on and see the truth behind these and other common misconceptions when it comes to dogs' behavior.

By Valarie V. Tynes, DVM, DACVB

Myth #1



I'm embarrassed to talk to my veterinarian about my pet's behavior. I'm afraid that I'm the cause of the problem!

A variety of factors play a role in the development of behavior problems, including a pet's genetics, early experiences, and environment. While you can certainly worsen a pet's behavior problem with inappropriate training methods, it is highly unlikely that you caused your pet's behavior problems. Many medical conditions and medications can also contribute to behavior changes, so your veterinarian is the best person to consult first when your pet exhibits worrisome behaviors.

FACT: Don't hesitate to ask your veterinarian about any problem that may affect your pet's health and well-being. Most behavior problems are at least manageable—if not

always curable. But the sooner you seek qualified advice, the higher the likelihood you can successfully treat the problem.

Myth #2



Puppies shouldn't go to puppy classes until they have had all of their shots or they will get sick.

The critical period for socialization in dogs lasts from the fourth to the 14th week of life. During this time, dogs learn about their environment, other dogs, and people. Poorly socialized dogs are more likely to exhibit behaviors that make them unsuitable as a pet and result in relinquishment to an animal shelter or euthanasia. Thus, the likelihood of death due to poor socialization is greater than the likelihood of illness or death due to contagious disease—as long as the puppy class is managed properly. All puppy classes should

- Only mix puppies of similar age
- Require that all puppies have their first vaccination several days before the beginning of the class
- Be held on an indoor surface that can be sanitized
- Clean all puppy waste immediately and disinfect the soiled area

- Not allow any puppies into the class that show signs of illness.

FACT: Proper early socialization can save a dog's life and is the best way to ensure that you end up with a pet that is well adjusted and a joy to live with for many years.

Myth #3



My dog is aggressive/fearful/shy because he/she was abused as a puppy.

While this may be a possibility in the case of some re-homed dogs whose exact histories are unknown, the most common cause of fearful behavior in dogs is inadequate or inappropriate early socialization. Fearful behavior is also heritable, so some dogs are born with a predisposition to shyness or fearfulness. Proper socialization may be even more critical in these individuals.

FACT: No matter the cause, dogs that exhibit fearful or anxious behavior frequently may be suffering and should be evaluated by a veterinarian. These animals can be helped in many different ways.

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Myth #4



I want that new medication I heard about to treat my pet's <insert behavior problem here>.

Medications alone rarely completely solve a behavior problem. Behavior modification and environmental modification are usually necessary to achieve long-term, lasting improvement. Some medications have been shown to increase the speed with which the behavior modification takes effect and can be considered another useful tool in treating behavior problems, but they are not the sole remedy.

FACT: Medications can play an important role in the treatment of a behavior problem but only if used appropriately as a part of a complete treatment plan.

Myth #5



Dogs that are aggressive are acting dominant.

While some dogs truly exhibit dominance aggression, they are much rarer than the popular media would have you believe. The problem with outdated dominance theories is that they result in the recommendation of confronta-

tional styles of training based on the erroneous belief that owners have to physically dominate their dogs. Not only is this dangerous, but it is usually ineffective and has resulted in damage to the human-animal bond far more often than it has led to success.

FACT: Most dogs with aggression problems are anxious or afraid and are more likely to respond to reward-based training under the supervision of a qualified animal behaviorist or board-certified veterinary behaviorist.

Myth #6



He must be angry with me. He knows what he did was wrong.

Many dogs show submissive behaviors when their owners arrive home. These behaviors of tucking the tail, lowering the ears, avoiding eye contact, and slinking away do not mean “I am sorry” in dog language. They mean “Quit acting angry at me.” They mean that the dog has learned to associate the return of people to the home with the presence of feces, garbage, or other destroyed items on the floor. The dog is not angry—he is afraid because in the past when people arrived and these items were on the floor, he was yelled at or hit. Even if the dog was not yelled at or hit, the angry body language of the human is clear to the dog, and the dog still learns to feel fear when people arrive. Punishment in these circumstances does not teach the dog anything (except to fear the arrival of people). The dog is completely incapable of associating any punishment

with the behavior he performed minutes or hours before.

FACT: Dogs do not eliminate on the floor or destroy items out of spite. The most likely cause of the behavior is anxiety or lack of appropriate exercise and stimulation (or incomplete housetraining). Rather than being angry at your dog, seek help from a professional. Your dog may be suffering.

Myth #7



If you use treats to train a dog, you will always need them to get the dog to obey your commands.

The principles that govern the laws of learning have shown this to be completely untrue. Treats are an excellent means of reinforcing a behavior. Clear and consistent reinforcement is necessary when you initially begin teaching any animal a new behavior. For some animals, a vocal reward, toys, or petting may serve as good reinforcers, but food is for many animals the most salient reinforcement there is. The rules of learning show that when first teaching a new behavior, reinforcing every single time the behavior is performed on cue will lead to the fastest rate of learning. Once a behavior is learned, intermittent reinforcement is the best means of maintaining the behavior and making it most resistant to extinction. This means that you only have to use the treats periodically once the behavior is learned.

People who believe that an animal is not responding because it knows there is no treat available have usually failed

to use reinforcement appropriately or don't realize that the animal has actually not learned the behavior. It is common for pet owners to think that an animal has learned a command long before it actually has.

FACT: When used correctly, positive reinforcement training with food rewards is far more likely to be effective and has less chance of doing harm than most other forms of training.

Myth #10



Dogs chase their tails or spin in circles because they are bored.

Repetitive behaviors such as pacing, spinning, tail chasing, and foot licking have many causes. To infer they are

FACT: Repetitive behaviors are complex problems that require evaluation, diagnosis, and treatment by a veterinarian.

Myth #9



Oh, he has a behavior problem? Send him to a trainer.

The behavior of all animals is a result of a complex interaction among their genetics, early development, and environment. For this reason, behavior problems can vary greatly in their underlying causes and must be treated by an appropriate professional. If your dog simply needs to be trained to sit, lie down, or heel, then a trainer is the best person to consult with. If, however, your dog is fearful of other animals, strange people, loud noises, or other

FACT: Anyone can call himself or herself a trainer or a behaviorist. This does not mean that he or she is the appropriate person to help you with your pet's particular behavior problem. It is important to be aware of the variety of professionals available to help with pet behavior problems and to choose the proper individual for the problem. The American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior's website (avsabonline.org) contains more information about these professionals and how to choose the right one for you and your pet.

Myth #10



Some punishment is required to teach dogs proper behavior.

Punishment should never be used as the first or only method of dealing with an unwanted behavior. Punishment can cause far more problems than it solves, especially if applied incorrectly or used on a dog with fear- or anxiety-related problems. It is extremely difficult for most people to use punishment effectively, since punishment is only effective if administered within one or two seconds of the unwanted behavior *and* is administered every time the behavior is performed. Inappropriately used punishment can severely damage your relationship with your pet and worsen many behavior problems.

FACT: It is much easier and more effective for you to teach your dog what behaviors you want it to perform and reward it for those behaviors than it is to punish your dog for unwanted behaviors. ♦

It is more effective to teach your dog what behaviors you want it to perform.

caused by boredom oversimplifies a complicated problem. These behaviors may be caused by frustration or conflict. They may often be secondary to certain medical problems that cause itching, pain, or discomfort in a body part. Sometimes they are caused by seizures, and in other cases they result from other forms of brain dysfunction.

benign stimuli; is aggressive under any circumstances; or is destructive when left alone, then you should consult with a veterinarian first. Veterinarians are trained to rule out primary medical causes for these problems and recognize when a problem requires referral to a specialist such as a board-certified veterinary behaviorist.