

Dog Training Myths - Debunked

~~I need to be Alpha as dogs are wolves~~

A common misconception with dog training is that we need to form a hierarchy or 'pack' at home as our dogs will otherwise be dominant and try and take over. Thankfully, our fur friends have no interest in taking over our house and are instead looking for a happy, stress free home where they can be part of the family. Although dogs did originate from wolves, they are now so far removed genetically that they don't function like wolves at all. Moreover, when wolf behaviour is mentioned as a model for dog training, the understanding of wolf behaviour used is often incorrect and based on studies that have long since been disproven by research scientists who study wolves extensively.



~~Using treats is bribery~~

Reward based training means that we have to find the thing that motivates our dog. Food is a great thing to use as most dogs really enjoy it and we can use little, pea sized portions of food to reinforce things that we like. This is known as positive reinforcement.

Positive reinforcement also works on people: going to work and getting paid, getting an A* for an essay, being praised for a job well done or receiving any kind of acknowledgement that you've done the right thing or a good job is reinforcement. If you didn't get paid, you'd probably not go to work (even if you really loved your job).

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.



~~"Positive Reinforcement" training only works with small/happy/regular dogs, not tough/large/obstinate/stubborn dogs~~

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 behaviours, there is no reason you can't do the same with your dog regardless of their breed. Moreover, as our knowledge of behaviour is strengthened through research, the consensus is that using aversive training methods on fearful or aggressive dogs is more likely to lead to worse behaviours, whereas focusing on rewarding the animal and alleviating their fears and anxieties leads to more well-adjusted dogs and stronger human-animal relationships.

~~Using people food in training will make my dog beg at the table~~

If you fed your dog 'people' food or 'dog' food from your plate at the table, then yes, your dog will learn to beg. Effectively they learn to sit next to you as you will feed them. However, they are not connecting the type of food you are feeding, just the context. Feeding human food in other training scenarios will not encourage your dog to beg. If you do find your dog begs at the table (as it may have been inadvertently reinforced – kids are brilliant at this!) then you can give your dog a stuffed Kong on their bed which will teach them they go to their 'place' while you eat



My dog knows he did something wrong because he looks guilty

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, most 'guilty' looks are usually misinterpreted signs of fear and apprehension. The dog doesn't 'know' it did anything wrong but they are now very worried by the person shouting at them or waving bits of chewed shoe around. If you find that your dog has chewed something or done something while you are out, you need to be addressing possible separation/isolation or boredom issues.



If a dog can't learn a behaviour, he is either stubborn, dominant, stupid, or a combination of the three

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 behaviour 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 behaviour. 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 behaviours 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 behaviour 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 behaviour - for example, a dog that has hip problems might find certain positions like "sit" uncomfortable.

My dog is dominant (or submissive)

This is another layover from the flawed study of wolves. Dogs do not spend their time seeking to establish control over humans. Dominance gets blamed for inappropriate behaviours (jumping up, pulling on the lead, toileting in the house) but the truth is that dominance has nothing to do with it and it's either a training issue eg. the dog hasn't learned that sitting to greet people is more reinforcing than jumping or a medical/behavioural issue eg. toileting in the house occurred while the owner was out and the dog has separation distress. Sadly, labelling dogs as 'dominant' means you can lose sight of the real issues that are happening that could very easily be solved with training.

Thanks for reading, I'm always happy to chat over any questions you may have

