

Training Your Dog: Misconceptions, Truths & Realities

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Things aren't always as they seem! We interpret our dog's actions from a human point of view and they interpret our actions from a canine point of view. While they can only ever react to us from their doggy viewpoint, *we* are capable of understanding why they do what they do and treat them accordingly. If you can learn and accept that your dog acts like a dog because he *is* a dog, you'll have a much better idea of how to communicate with and how to motivate your dog.

You'll see that the relationship with your best friend need not be contentious and is certainly not a struggle for dominance. This understanding will make training *with* your dog infinitely more enjoyable and rewarding to you both.

Misconception: "Dogs want to please us."

Truth: Dogs do what works for *them*. If they learn "sit" earns them a morsel of food, then they quickly sit, particularly if they are hungry. If they figure out they can do something that puts you in a good mood—then *they* will be sure to get pets, praise & cookies!

Reality: If you want your dog to do what you want, you must find what motivates your dog to do that. Your dog needs a reason that makes sense to him.

Misconception: "My dog poops on the floor (digs up the yard, rips up the couch, barks, chews my shoes, etc.) when he is mad at me!"

Truth: Dogs do these things out of boredom or anxiety. They are not human, and thus are incapable of plotting revenge.

Reality: If you want to reduce bad habits, then you must prevent giving them opportunities to develop them. Give them something else to do instead—a stuffed Kong, a bully stick, play ball. If they are anxious, resolve their anxiety.

Misconception: "My dog knows he did wrong, I can tell because he looks guilty!"

Truth: Your dog only knows that you sound or look threatening and/or probably did so in previous situations with the same circumstances.

Reality: Your dog is exhibiting normal canine "submissive" signals to ward off a confrontation from you, thus saving himself from perceived danger.

Misconception: "My dog deliberately ignores me."

Truth: Your dog simply finds something else more interesting. Unlike us, the floor *always* pays off with lovely smells, crumbs, and surprises; the park *always* pays off with squirrels, bikes, dogs, worms.....you get the idea!

Reality: You must find something that will make *you* more exciting and interesting to your dog when these other things are present.

Misconception: “I was told to hold my dog down on his back and stare in his eyes until he submits to show him I am the alpha in the household.”

Truth: Bad advice based on a seriously flawed study done on wolves in the 1940’s. This will not teach your dog anything other than to be afraid of you and perhaps defend himself from you. Potentially dangerous and definitely damaging to your relationship.

Reality: True leaders don’t need to use force. You are the natural “alpha” because you are dominant over everything your dog wants—food, toys, attention, water, walks, a place to sleep. *You control all these things.*

Misconception: “My dog is stubborn.”

Truth: Your dog is merely choosing what *she* wants to do.

Reality: Your dog is not stubborn. *You just haven’t yet found what will convince your dog to do what you want her to do.*

Misconception: “If I use food, won’t my dog always expect food?”

Truth: Your dog is always choosing between two things: good for him or bad for him. Once your dog becomes reliable in a behavior, you may not need to use food as often because his responses become automatic. But certainly you’ll want to use it enough to preserve his response to your requests.

Reality: *If you get a paycheck for doing what your boss expects, won’t you always expect a paycheck?*

Misconception: “My dog is dumb, hard to train, stupid, bored, doesn’t like to do that....”

Truth: Your dog doesn’t understand what you want or isn’t motivated to change.

Reality: *You just haven’t yet communicated to your dog so that he understands what it is you would like. Giving feedback to your dog on his actions is critical. You also need to find what motivates your dog to do what you want. Ultimately, your dog’s success or failure is up to you!*

There is no evidence that dogs have the kind of complex emotional lives and value systems that we do. It's one reason why we love them so much, in fact. They are neither “good” nor “bad.” They don't hold grudges, act in petty ways, or seek revenge. They read our moods but not our minds. If they did, we'd start loving them as we love other humans, which could mean a lot less than we love them now.

Dogs are not “people” of another species. They ARE another species. To train and care for them properly, to show them how to live in our complex world, requires first and foremost that we understand that.

Jon Katz, Author of “A Dog Year” & “The New Work of Dogs”

