



## 10 Most Common Canine Myths

### 1. Dogs wag their tail when they are happy

The oldest and most common canine myth. Certainly, dogs often wag their tail when having a positive interaction, but there can be many other reasons. The tail is an essential part of the dog's communication system, and the height, motion, speed and whether tense or relaxed are all important factors. For example, a low to mid-tail wagging slowly could signify a relaxed dog or a worried dog, while a tail held up higher and wagging faster could mean a dog is happy and excited or on the alert. To get the whole picture, the dog's tail must be read in context with the rest of the body.

The direction of movement also appears to be significant. A 2007 study led by scientists at the University of Trento in Italy, revealed that dogs wag their tails to the right when looking at something they want to approach- such as their owner, but wag their tails to the left when faced with something they want to back away from, such as an unfriendly or aggressive dog.

### 2. Dogs look guilty when they know they've done something wrong

The most persistent canine myth. A quick search on YouTube will unearth dozens of clips of seemingly comical 'guilty' looking dogs displaying a low body posture and averting their gaze with the white of the eyes exposed. These dogs are often seen grinning, raising a paw, dropping onto their side or back, or crouching and creeping towards their owner with their tail tucked under and attempting to lick their hands or face.

These displays, frequently mistaken for guilt are in fact a set of appeasement behaviours - a pacifying response to owner voice, facial cues, and overall body language. Some dog owners claim that their dog looks guilty when they return home, before witnessing evidence of a trashed bin, ripped cushion or other perceived misbehaviour. This can be explained by associative learning, the process by which a dog has learnt a particular action is likely to result in a specific response, such as being told off or some other punishment. So next time Fido looks at you with that guilty look what he is likely trying to tell you is 'You look scary, please don't yell at me'.

### 3. Dogs are wolves and therefore should be treated like wolves

The assumption that because domestic dogs are descended from wolves, they should be treated as such is well and truly outdated. Comparing dogs to wolves is similar to comparing humans with chimpanzees - as the genetic distance separating them, a measure of the genetic difference between species, is roughly about the same. While humans and chimpanzees share many behaviours, humans are clearly distinct and the same applies to dogs and wolves. Dogs, while sharing genes with and retaining many juvenile features of the ancestral wolves, have evolved and greatly specialised. Though similarities remain, their behaviour is distinct from wolves and they now fill a niche of their own.

### 4. Dogs are pack animals

Following on from the misguided belief that dogs are wolves, it was further assumed that they must also be pack animals. However, research in the field of animal behaviour in the last ten years has shown this not to be the case. Studies of free-ranging remnant and stray populations in Europe, India and South America have found that domestic dogs do not form cohesive packs, but transient groups with a loose structure where individuals come and go, a trait not found in wolf packs. Unlike wolves, most dogs are predominantly scavengers as opposed to active predators. There is therefore no benefit for them in hunting together and sharing their food.

## **5. Dogs are dominant and try to assert themselves over their owners as well as other dogs**

The concept of dominance in wolves and therefore in dogs, has largely been replaced by a more modern way of thinking based on evidence gathered from research carried out in the field of animal behaviour over the last twenty-five years. While unsupported by science, it still clings on in the public psyche due to the popularisation of dominance-based trainers in the media, in particular on television. Sadly, this has led to man's best friend being greatly misunderstood, with everything from jumping up, pulling on lead, sleeping on beds, stealing food and aversion to being groomed being mislabelled as 'dominance'. The aversive (harsh) training methods often associated with the dominance ideology are known to potentially cause stress and trauma, can lead to learned helplessness, or worse trigger or escalate aggression. But ultimately, it causes damage to the human-canine bond. This myth has done a great disservice to our canine companions.

John Bradshaw, in his excellent book 'In Defence of Dogs' published in 2012, makes a case for dogs being distinct from wolves and debunks the dominance model in a format that can be easily understood. More in-depth information regarding the behaviour of dogs, supported by peer-reviewed scientific evidence is available in the downloadable ABTC Ethical Dog Training Statement.

## **6. Some dogs just want to please**

This myth is firmly rooted in anthropomorphism - explained simply, we like to attribute human characteristics to non-human creatures and in particular to our pets. Dogs are not born with an innate desire to please humans, but instead are motivated by attention, food, praise, toys and games or any pleasurable reward. Ultimately, dogs work out what is beneficial for them and how to get the best from their environment. Some dogs are more motivated than others and will work harder to get rewards, and therefore are often labelled as dogs that 'really want to please'.

## **7. You can't teach an old dog new tricks**

There is no evidence to suggest that older dogs cannot learn new cues and behaviours, and established behaviours are not barriers to learning new behaviours. Dogs need mental as well as physical stimulation throughout their lives. As long as a dog is healthy, comfortable and pain-free and enjoys short training sessions, there is no reason why he or she cannot learn new tricks. Just make sure you use gentle positive reinforcement and that you are not forcing your will on your older companion if he or she does not show interest or appears to be avoiding training.

## **8. Dogs who growl are aggressive**

Growling is used to respond to a perceived threat, signifying that there may be an escalation in aggression should the threat continue. Growling can be used in a variety of contexts and does not mean a dog should necessarily be labelled as aggressive. A dog may growl because he is in pain and is trying to avoid being handled. A timid, or older dog may growl at a bouncy puppy's repeated attempts at boisterous play. A dog on lead may growl if being charged at by an off-lead dog. A nervous dog or a dog with a lack of early positive experiences around people and dogs may growl if put in a situation where he cannot cope. Growling is the warning system that comes before snapping and biting - behaviours used as a last resort when a dog has previously tried unsuccessfully to use a non-confrontational strategy. Some dogs, having learnt that avoidance strategies did not previously get them out of trouble, will automatically default to growling and a more aggressive stance when faced with a potential threat.

Some dogs growl when they are playing, i.e. play growl. This is fine, as long as play does not get out of hand due to increasing arousal levels and the growling does not escalate.

## **8. Playing tug-of-war makes dogs aggressive**

Another popular myth and you may even have read this in books in the past. However, research carried out by behaviour scientists at the University of Bristol to test this theory, found no evidence to support it. One study also demonstrated that the assumption the human must always win the game to be irrelevant. Playing tug-of-war will not encourage your dog to become aggressive. However, it is important to teach your dog some self-control and to avoid games resulting in uncontrollable arousal. Playing rough and tumble with puppies is not recommended as it is likely to encourage rough play with dogs and humans in adult life.

## **9. Comforting and petting a frightened dog will reward and reinforce the fear**

Until recently, it was believed that to comfort a dog frightened of say, fireworks, thunder, traffic, other dogs, etc. could act as a reinforcer which could help perpetuate or worsen the fear. However, recent studies have also refuted this. All dogs are different and for some, close proximity to and a reassurance from their owners when they are frightened actually enables them to cope. Calm and relaxed reassurance with minimal fuss is recommended, as it will prevent communicating anxiety from person to dog.

## **10. There is no point giving a dog toys as they will destroy them**

The reason many dogs rip some toys to pieces and remove the stuffing from others with great enthusiasm is because they are acting on their genes and acting out parts of the canine hunting sequence. Also known as the predatory sequence, the official scientific version has seven steps, which vary slightly between breeds. Simplified, it consists of search, track and find, grab and kill, and dissect and eat. Dogs have an innate need to express all or part(s) of this sequence (depending on breed) and are happiest when it can be stimulated and satisfied through chewing, play, games, or a specific canine activity. A good strategy is to provide your dog with good quality chew toys and items but keep more expensive toys for supervised play. If you have small children, it is a good idea to keep their toys separate or make them inaccessible to your dog. Physical and mental stimulation for pet dogs should not be underestimated. The results of a large-scale study published in 2014 strongly suggest that enrichment via toys and games is as important as walking your dog.