

# 27 MYTHS ABOUT DOG TRAINING

## And What To Do About Them

Have you noticed the upsurge in myths and incorrect analyses of dog behaviors on the internet recently? I sure have. From ideas about your dog being dominant to conversations about your puppy being too young to train, the myths and misinformation are abundant. Well, I'm here to help you wade through that misinformation and some of those misapplied facts to figure out what you should keep and what you should trash.

Here are twenty-seven myths about dog training and what you should do about them.



### **Myth #1: My Puppy Is Too Young To Be Trained**

Let's start off with one of the more popular myths, that your puppy is too young to be trained. The verdict on this one is that you should **trash it**. This is a common myth but the fact is it is never too early to train your pup.<sup>1</sup> A dog starts learning the moment they arrive in the natural world. They begin to identify sights, sounds, textures and smells. Unlike an adult dog, your puppy may have a shorter attention span and this will require more patience when teaching behaviors but there is no reason why your puppy can't start learning right away. Puppies can start learning as early as three weeks old! The sooner you start, the quicker your puppy will learn. Training your puppy the first day you bring him home will set him up for success in the long run. So start training and socializing your puppy as soon as possible!

### **Myth #2: It's Too Late to Start Training My Dog**

This is the converse of myth number one, but it is equally as untrue. Your dog is never too old to learn and as a result, it is never too late to train him/her! A dog learns throughout their lives and while there are prime socialization periods in puppyhood, your dog's ability to learn does not "turn off" at a certain point. As long as you can give your dog something he likes (treats, his favorite toy, petting, playtime, etc) when he does something you like, he will want to do those things more so he can receive a reward. This continues all the way into his golden age. If your dog becomes blind, deaf, or otherwise physically impaired over time, keep his sensory challenges like nose work in mind as you train, so you can use cues and reward markers your dog can still detect.

The truth is, just like humans, dogs can acquire bad habits over time. If you allow that bad habit to continue without addressing it, it will increase. The longer the dog practices an unwanted behavior like jumping on you, incessant barking without provocation, or unwanted potty behaviors the better he gets at it. The best way to train these behaviors out of a dog is not to yell, push them off, or give them attention—these actions are just reinforcing the bad behavior in your attention-seeking pup! The best thing to do is to get a professional dog trainer or a behaviorist to help train your dog out of these bad habits. So the verdict on this myth? **Trash it**. Because it is never too late to train your furry friend out of bad behaviors!

### **Myth #3: Dog's Resent Training**

Unsurprisingly, the verdict here is, **Trash it**. Contrary to popular belief, dogs actually like training; they only resent it if it is unpleasant and no fun. And any dog trainer worth their salt knows this. Dogs love to work with us to help us accomplish tasks and they also love to learn the things they like. So if training becomes a new game that your dog can learn and it has plenty of reinforcements for his efforts and successes, your dog will love to learn and look forward to the next game he plays.

#### **Myth #4: My Puppy Will Grow Out Of His Problematic Behaviors**

Have a puppy that is fearful of riding in the car, has leash reactivity, or displays fear-based aggression? How about a puppy that pees on your carpet? Chews up your kid's favorite toy or refuses to do his business in a designated area? The fact of the matter is that your puppy will not grow out of these problematic behaviors without guidance and proper training. To fix some of these behaviors you need to address them as early as possible if you hope to correct them. If you don't they will quickly become a habit that will be difficult to change, especially if it is something that your dog likes or you have been inadvertently rewarding them for it. Fun fact, screaming "no" at your puppy or grabbing their mouth may sometimes be seen as a positive reaction from your attention-seeking pup! So be very careful! Some dogs are more concerned about how people react to their behaviors while other dogs will have fun at any cost! That is why proper training is important. So the verdict on this myth? **Trash it.**



*Here is a quick side note;* it is worth noting that many irritating puppy behaviors will ease as your puppy grows older. Behavior like puppy mouthiness is often exacerbated by your puppy going through the teething process. And that crazy puppy energy will lessen as your puppy ages. However, you will still want to work on limiting your dog's chance to reinforce these behaviors through repetition. For example, while nipping and biting are normal, you'll still want to work on redirecting that behavior so it is not reinforced and becomes a habit into adulthood.

#### **Myth #5: Puppies Shouldn't Go To Puppy Socialization Classes Until They Have Had All of their Shots Or They Will Get Sick**

**Trash** this myth. As long as your puppy class is managed properly, there is no problem with taking your new pup to the classes. Just make sure that:

- Only puppies of a similar age are in that class.
- The class owner requires that all puppies have at least their first round of vaccination several days before class begins.
- And the class is kept clean and disinfected regularly.

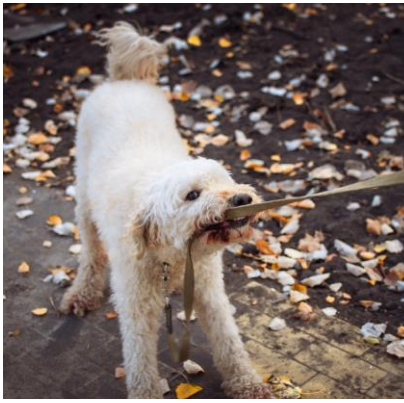


#### **Myth #6: My Dog Is Fearful And Shy Because He/She Was Abused As A Puppy.**



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 for shyness or fearfulness. Proper socialization may be even more critical in these individual cases. 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. So my conclusion, this myth is partially true. So we can **keep** the parts of it that apply to your pup.

## **Myth # 7: My Dog Is Untrainable. He Is Stubborn and Stupid.**



Hold your horses on this one my friend! Your dog is not stubborn or stupid. There may be a host of factors that are contributing to your dog's slow progress in training. Let's take a look at this little-known fact. Did you know that in many ways dogs are just like people? Yep! It's true. Your furry canine may pick up things a lot quicker or a lot slower than other dogs, just like a human. Think about when you were learning Algebra. There were just some students in your class who got in quicker than you. Did it mean you were stubborn or stupid? Nope, it just meant that maybe the information wasn't being communicated to you in a way you could understand or maybe you had a learning disability you didn't know about like dyslexia.

The same goes for dogs. Often, when a dog is having difficulty learning a task, it is because he/she is not being communicated in a way they understand <sup>2</sup> Other times, they fail to learn a task because they are not being properly instructed as to when they have done a behavior correctly and therefore have no way of knowing what you are asking of them. As a result, you must always reward your dog for doing something right and use patience when demonstrating the desired behavior. If your dog still seems to be having trouble learning something new, you might have to consider whether the behavior you are trying to achieve is too complex and perhaps needs to be broken down into smaller steps.

Another possibility to consider is whether the dog is capable of physically learning a certain behavior. For example, if your dog has a medical condition like hip dysplasia it may be difficult for him to follow certain commands like "sit." Also, it may be harder to teach some dogs certain behaviors because of their physical limitations. For example, teaching a pug nose work due to its squished nose may be a little harder than, say, teaching a German Shepherd. But the conclusion is this; all dogs can learn and can be taught and trained. All you need is patience, time and if needed a proper veterinarian, a professional dog trainer, or a behaviorist.

So the verdict on this myth? For the good of your furry friend and yourself, ***Trash it.***

## **Myth #8: You Have To Be The Alpha Or "Dominate" Your Dog**

There is a common misconception that humans have to exert their will over their dogs at every opportunity to show them who is boss. This comes from the erroneous assumption that since dogs are descendants of wolves, they will only obey an alpha, the way a wolf would. ***Trash*** this myth, right off the bat. No discussion. No debate. Your dog doesn't want you to be an "alpha" or to "dominate" him. Your dog just wants to be your friend. Dominance theory and training methods using physical force are not good teaching strategies. <sup>3</sup> They have been proven to be a poor way to teach pet dogs and are linked to increased aggression. <sup>4</sup>

Some behaviors that your dog displays may be incorrectly labeled as "dominant." But it's not true. If your dog is displaying certain behaviors like pulling on a leash, being resistant to being groomed or simply jumping on you, it is not because they want to establish control over you. It is most likely because either they have not yet learned that certain behaviors are undesirable, or when it comes to the leash, they have not been taught that they should walk closely beside you, or when it comes to grooming he likely finds brush and clippers uncomfortable or scary or both. Never assume that any display of behavior from your dog is them being "dominant." Most times they are simply untrained or simply not experienced in what behaviors you do not want them to engage in. The best way to fix this is to teach your dog using positive reinforcement rather than force. This will result in a pet that knows how to be a good pet and enjoys learning new skills!



## Myth #9: Using Prong/Shock/Chain Collars Will Correct Undesirable Behaviors Easily.



Training equipment that uses aversive techniques or tools does not make your dog a better learner. Generally speaking, these types of aversive tools are unnecessary and potentially dangerous to your pet, especially if the trainer is inexperienced.

Using punishment should never be used as the first or only method of dealing with unwanted behavior. This is because punishment can cause far more problems than it solves especially if 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. As a result, it is easier and much more effective to

teach your dog what behaviors you want them to perform and reward them for those behaviors instead of punishing them for unwanted behaviors. So the verdict on this myth? **Trash it.**

A quick side note: This is not to say that these methods *never* have their place. They can, for example, assist in situations that could otherwise cause a dog to become injured or die if a problematic behavior is not corrected swiftly. For example, consider a dog with a strong herding drive that has been chasing cars. Once the dog starts running down a car, he stops responding to cues he knows and is normally good at. In such a case, using a punisher may interrupt the problem behavior so you can cue him to come back. But it is important to note that such tools treat the symptom and not the root cause of the behavior, so positive behavioral training is still needed to teach your dog how to control or redirect that herding instinct. Using punishment is the last resort if all forms of reinforcement of alternative behaviors are exhausted. You can acknowledge triggers and change the required behavior for the triggers in tiny steps to achieve the desired behavior.

## Myth #10: Other kinds of Punishment Can Help Prevent Problematic Behaviors

This is an addendum to myth number eight but the verdict is still the same: **Trash it.** Hitting, kicking, yelling or any other kind of punishment is not a good way to teach your dog anything. No dog is a psychic. There are no punishments that will magically teach them to permanently stop any behavior. The only purpose that punishment serves is to teach your dog to become afraid of you. As a result, he may seem to do less problematic behavior around you but that is only because he has learned to avoid you and he may continue to do those things when you are not around. So instead of punishing your dog, try to develop tricks and techniques to interrupt unwanted behavior. For example, instead of yelling “no” (which by the way, means nothing to a dog) how about saying “sit” or “go to bed” if your dog has learned these commands already. This helps to curb unwanted behavior by asking your dog to do a compliant behavior instead.



### **Myth #11: Crate Training Is Cruel**



While your dog would always prefer to be by your side, they can learn to enjoy their crate over time. If executed thoughtfully, gradually, and with compassion, your dog will likely grow to view his crate as his “bedroom” rather than a space for punishment. Using a crate can be very helpful for potty training puppies, and can prevent your pup from getting into trouble or chewing up cables while he is alone at home for a couple of hours. So as far as myths go, this one is at the bottom of the list; **Trash it.**

*A quick side note:* It is worthwhile to point out that *inappropriate* use of crates can be cruel and lead to your dog developing stress or anxiety problems. If dogs are not trained on how to enjoy their crate space gradually or are left in it for extended amounts of time every day, they can learn to associate their crate with the stress they feel while inside it.

If you feel uncomfortable crate training your dog, there are always alternatives available such as x-pens (or dog playpens) and indoor dog gates that can achieve the result of cordoning off a private, safe place for your dog to play while you are away.

### **Myth #12: Positive Training Means Your Dog Will Only Listen If You Have Treats In Hand**

Treats are an excellent way to build motivation for learning new things in your dog but they don’t have to be used forever. The rules of learning show that when first teaching 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, periodical reinforcement is the best means of maintaining that behavior and making sure it isn’t eroded or eliminated over time. This means you only have to use treats periodically once the behavior is learned. And while treats are often quite successfully used to motivate your dog, you can also use other forms of rewards like toys, playtime, petting, or anything else your dog wants. So the verdict on this myth is this; **Trash it.** Your dog won’t only listen if you have treats in hand. He will listen once the behavior is learned and reinforced periodically.



### **Myth #13: Using Food In Training Will Cause Your Dog To Beg At The Table**

This is simply not true. *Feeding* your dog at the table is what will cause him to beg at the table, whether you feed him food from your own plate or from a bag of dog kibble. If you don’t want your dog to beg while you’re eating, teach him a “go to your place” command to show him that he needs to go hang out somewhere else while you are enjoying a meal. So my advice? **Trash** this myth.

### **Myth #14: Using Food In Training Is Bribery**



While food can certainly be used to “bribe” a dog, the above statement displays a fundamental lack of understanding of learning theory. When you are teaching an animal—including humans—something new, there needs to be motivation for “getting it right” and a signal that you have done so (a reward, or more correctly, a reinforcement). In humans, this could be an A+ from a teacher, a paycheck, or a bonus from your job. All animals “work” for reinforcement or a reward and dogs are no different. Trainers often use foods simply because most dogs love food and find it worth working for, but we can also use toys, play, work, petting, happy talk, and a whole variety of other things to reward our dogs. A reward or reinforcement is something that is presented to an animal in order to show them that they did something right. Take this away and there

would be no incentive for doing anything. While on the other hand, a bribe is something you give to an animal to get them to do something they already know how to do. So my suggestion? **Trash** this myth.

### **Myth #15: Playing Tug Of War Will Make My Dog More Aggressive**

Playing tug with your dog will not make them more aggressive. On the contrary, tug of war is a fun interactive game that encourages your dog to get excited about using his mouth and strength to win a valuable item from his playmate. Tug of war also has the added benefit of teaching your dog mouth control and how to take cues while playing. Some dogs may growl while playing tug of war but since it happens within the context of the game you’re playing with him, it does not normally encourage aggressive behaviors in other contexts. So the verdict? **Trash** this myth. As long as you do tug of war properly, it is a great game to play with your dog. During the game, they will learn that it is okay never to put their teeth on your skin when grasping for the toy with their mouth and they will learn to drop the toy on command when you are ready to end the game. Using tug of war as a reinforcer instead of food is very common among many dog sport competitors and working dog trainers because dogs enjoy it so much! So take my advice and don’t be afraid to play Tug with your best furry pal!



*Important side note:* There are a few reasons we as positive reinforcement trainers suggest not playing tug with your puppy until they have physically matured and have also learned some basics. Puppies should never tug hard. Physically, your puppy is not developed enough and tugging hard with your puppy can cause muscular and skeletal damage that you may not see until they are much older. Some skeletal and muscular damage such as disc issues in their necks, tendon or muscle damage and even arthritis can be linked to tug at a young age. The other reason is that most puppies have not learned impulse control and commands like “leave it,” and “drop it.” Playing tug can teach a puppy to hold onto things and not let go which can be dangerous for a dog at any age. Also, and especially, don’t chase your dog if they grab something. They will consider it a game.

### **Myth #16: Dominance Training Is Necessary For Large Dogs**

Dominance theory or training involves the use of inappropriate force and punishment to exert control over your dog. You can see why right off the bat, we are **trashing** this myth. Dominance training is not necessary for dogs of any type; large or small.

While larger dogs are presumed to need more training than smaller dogs for safety reasons, dogs of all sizes benefit from improved relationship and safety that comes along with positive reinforcement style training methods. Using positive reinforcement primarily to train animals is the norm among exotic animals and marine mammal trainers. If you can train a large predator such as a killer whale or a tiger by concentrating on rewarding behaviors, there is no reason why you can't do the same with your dog, regardless of his breed and size.

Further to this, the problem with the outdated dominance theory is that they recommend confrontational 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 in many instances has a far greater chance of damaging the human-animal bond than actually improving it.



### **Myth #17: My Dog Did This Because He Is Mad At Me**



Did your dog urinate in the house? Is he displaying destructive behavioral tendencies like chewing up his bed or destroying furniture? Relax; your dog is not doing these things because he is mad at you! Yep, you heard me. A dog exhibiting certain behaviors like these is likely not because of you but for a myriad of other reasons that could be medical, psychological, or social. You see, most dogs are motivated by social reasons or by self-interest. They do things like chew up furniture or ruin your perfect pair of shoes not because they're trying to be vindictive but because 1) They may not be fully housetrained, 2) They may be suffering from a medical condition like urinary tract infection or 3) Your dog feels stressed because they are not getting their basic mental and social needs met.

The truth is, dogs do not understand the cost of our belongings and personal items so they are incapable of the kind of thought process that would allow them to think that chewing on your expensive red bottoms, or chewing on furniture is a way to get back at you for some perceived slight, no matter how much we would like to believe that is the case. Many times when owners think their pet is mad at them, they are projecting their own interpretations of how they would feel if they were in the same situation. Stop doing that. While we cannot know exactly how dogs think and feel about all the things we do, acting out of spite and with malicious intent does not seem to be the motivator for destructive behaviors. So the verdict? **Trash** this myth.

### **Myth #18: Dogs That Are Aggressive Are Acting Dominant**



While some dogs truly exhibit dominant aggression, it is much rarer than most people believe. The truth is, most dogs with aggression problems are either anxious or afraid.<sup>5</sup> This behavior is not motivated because your dog wants to be ‘dominant’ or in charge of you. Sometimes your dog does ‘aggressive’ things because they are rewarding for him. If you use positive reinforcement training you can easily change the behaviors that you find undesirable.

As a quick side note: If your dog is exhibiting aggression under any circumstance, you should consult with a veterinary to rule out an underlying medical problem as the reason for the behavior. Veterinarians are trained to recognize when a problem is medical or requires referral to a certified specialist like a trainer or behaviorist. So the verdict here? **Trash** this myth.

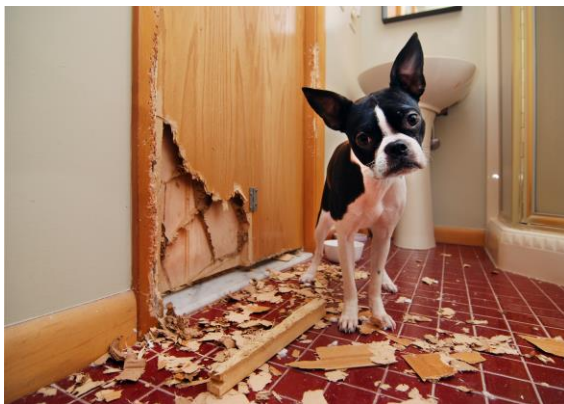
### **Myth #19: Your Dog Won't Respect You If You Let Him Sleep In Your Bed**

This is a very common misconception, and I can see why people believe it. But it's simply not true. Letting your dog sleep in your bed does not mean your dog will not respect you. More often than not your dog just wants to be close to you and the family; he wants to be where the action is. But proper training can teach him to value his own doggie bed or sleeping space so that ultimately it doesn't become an issue for you.



So the verdict is out, you can **trash** this myth.

### **Myth #20: Allowing Your Dog To Follow You Everywhere Will Lead To Separation Anxiety**



This myth is true! As mentioned earlier, your dog just wants to be with you. That's what makes them such great friends! Allowing your furry friend to tag along with you as you do things throughout the day will usually not lead to separation anxiety. Separation intolerance or anxiety describes the stress that dogs feel when they are alone. Some dogs are prone to developing this no matter what we do—especially dogs that have been through several homes or spent time in shelters. A dog's reaction to that feeling of stress can range from trembling, panting, and drooling to barking, whining, and chewing things.

However since we occasionally need to go places where our dogs are not welcomed, it is important to have a containment strategy that keeps your dogs safe, out of trouble, and happy until you get home. This can look like using crate training, x-pens, or indoor gates. You can also give them toys and interactive games that will keep them busy until you get home.

So this verdict on this one? **Keep**. There is more than a kernel of truth in it!



### **Myth #21: You Know Your Dog Did Something Wrong If He Looks “Guilty”**

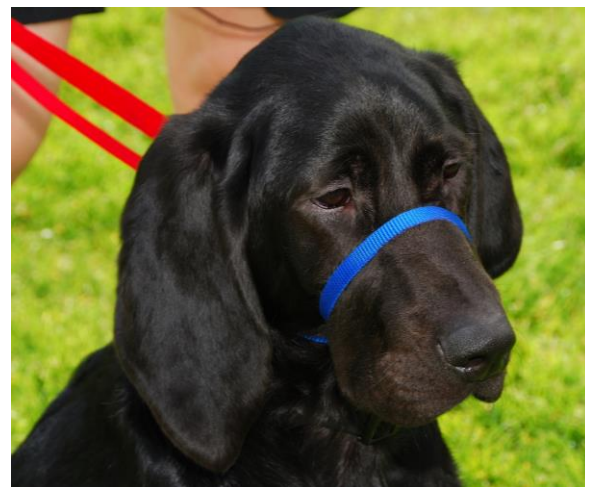


Guilt is a human emotion and whether animals feel this emotion in the same ways that humans do is subject to a great deal of debate. However, in terms of looking “guilty”, a recent study at Barnard College in New York found that the “guilty” look that people claim to see in their pet is entirely dependent on whether or not the person expected to see the look, regardless of whether or not their dog had actually done something to feel “guilty” about.<sup>6</sup> When a dog looks “guilty” he is usually responding with a behavior in an attempt to diffuse your anger. Licking his lip, turning his head away from you, narrowing his eyes, flattening his ears, crouching down, tucking his tail, urinating and rolling on his back are all parts of a dog’s body language that says, “please don’t be mad at me.” In situations like this, the chances are excellent that the dog does not know what behavior he did that got you so

upset. Instead, your dog saw you get upset; he saw your eyes alter shape, your body get tense and you’re leaning forward and shouting. He starts displaying canine body language in an attempt to appease you, not necessarily because he knows what he has done and feels guilty for it. So the verdict on this? ***Tentatively trash***. Your dog does feel some amount of emotion but not necessarily guilt for the supposed wrongdoing. The best thing you can do when your dog has made a poor choice is to manage the behavior by changing the triggers and environmental arrangement. This can include putting your shoes in a secure place before leaving, isolating your dog in a crate, or using x-pens so that he cannot damage your things.

### **Myth #22: Using Head Collars Will Cause Neck Or Spine Injuries**

This is an often repeated claim that can be found all over the internet. But the fact is there is no documented evidence to suggest that using head collars on your dog will cause neck or spine injuries. In truth, the proper use of these types of collars should keep your dog out of trouble while at the same time posing no physical harm to your favorite furry friend! So word of advice, ***trash*** this myth. We should add that proper training to accept a head halter should be performed. You cannot expect your dog to understand that wearing a head collar is a good thing if they have never worn one before. So train your furry friend the love the head halter in small steps using reinforcement with things your furry canine friend loves!



### **Myth #23: If You Adopt An Older Dog, It Won’t Bond To You Or Learn How To Live With A New Family**

This claim is false. As false as the old cliché “an old dog can’t learn new tricks.” The fact of the matter is that you can train any dog at any age to adapt to their new environment and even a new family. The only difference is that because the animal is older he would already have some learned behaviors that you may need to train him out of. And this is easily done with a professional dog trainer or behaviorist. So please, for the sake of all the adult dogs out there looking for a new forever home, ***trash*** this myth.

## **Myth #24: Dogs Are Descendants Of Wolves And Therefore Training Should Be Based On How Wolf Packs Interact With Each Other**

Unsurprisingly, this claim is not true. While it is true that dogs are descendants of wolves, there is a marked distinction between both species. And the distinction between both is such that how a wolf behaves is wholly irrelevant to how we live and interact with our dogs today. Moreover, when wolf behavior is mentioned as a model for dog training, the understanding of wolf behavior used is often incorrect and based on studies that have long since been disproven by research scientists who study wolves extensively.<sup>7</sup> So the verdict? **Trash** this myth.

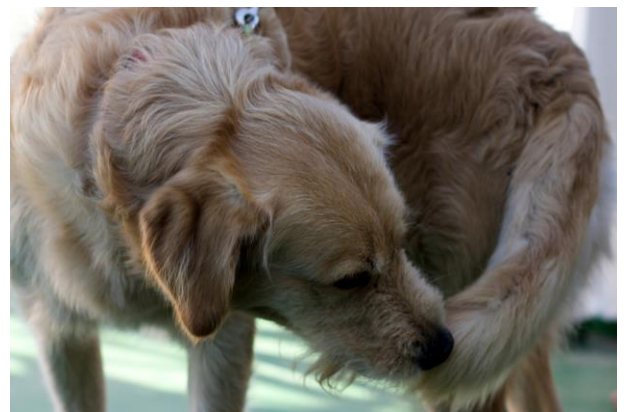


## **Myth #25: I'm The Cause Of My Dog's Behavioral Problems**

A variety of factors play a role in the development of your animal's behavioral problems, including a pet's genetics, early experiences, and environment. While you can certainly worsen a pet's behavioral problems with inappropriate training methods, it is highly unlikely that you caused your pet's behavioral problems. Consult your veterinarian or your trusted professional dog trainer if you need help in addressing your dog's behavioral issues. So Trash or keep? **Trash.**

## **Myth #26: Dogs Chase Their Tails Or Spin In Circles Because They Are Bored**

This may be an oversimplification of a very complex problem. Repetitive behaviors such as pacing, spinning, tail chasing, and foot licking may have many causes. To infer that they are caused by boredom may be incorrect. These behaviors may be caused by frustration or conflict. They may often be symptomatic of certain underlying medical problems that cause itching, pain, or discomfort in a body part. Sometimes they are caused by seizures, and in other cases, they may result from other forms of brain dysfunction and so may require treatment from a veterinarian. So my advice? **Trash** this myth.



## **Myth #27: Medication Alone Can Treat My Dog's Behavioral Problems**



Medications alone rarely completely solve a behavioral problem. Behavior modification and environmental modification are usually necessary to achieve long-term, lasting improvements. 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 behavioral problems but they are not the sole remedy. They should be used in conjunction with behavioral training as a part of a comprehensive treatment plan for your pup. So **trash** this myth.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, we have looked at twenty-seven (27) myths about dog training. I have gone through each one to show you which myths have a kernel of truth that you should hang onto and which ones you should completely trash! I hope you found this article helpful!

### **Resources Cited**

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