Common behavior myths
The unicorn lives!
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Myth: Growling is bad and should be punished.
Fact: Reward growling. Punishing it is dangerous.
- The animal is communicating/speaking with us.
- Growling is an attempt at avoiding an escalation in conflict.
- Growling is considered a polite behavior.
- If punished, the animal inhibits growing to avoid punishment.
- If punished, the animal may skip growling and bite instead.

Myth: Giving treats, praise reinforces fears, aggression.
Fact: It's impossible to reinforce fear.
- Giving someone a hot fudge sundae will not make them more scared.
- Treats, praise represent a competing stimulus.
- Likely to affect an alternative behavioral response.
- Better chance of achieving neutrality, ... even for a few seconds.
- Gives us time to retreat, or rely on a more considerate approach.
Myth: When confronted with something very scary, the dog seems “okay with it.”
Fact: Animal is being flooded. Expect a more intense response the next time.
- Toe nail clips
- Forced restraint.
- Loss of control is a potent contributor to fear, stress.
- Likely to cause some level of post traumatic stress.
- Potentially makes the pet more dangerous when it arrives in an environment in which it feels more confident.
- Expect a more intense fear response the next time … snowball effect.

Myth: Backing off tells the animal we’re submitting to it.
Fact: Teaches the animal that we are reasonable and wish to avoid conflict.
- Likely to stick with agonistic displays (growling, barking) because it works to avoid an escalation in conflict.
- Can help prevent bites and other unnecessary trauma.
- Communicates to the animal that we are reasonable and make safe decisions.
- Backing off helps the animal feel more at ease.

Myth: Jumping during greetings is rude.
Fact: Jumping is a friendly gesture.
- Trying to reach the mouth to lick (cause regurgitation).
- Has nothing to do with dominance.
- Don’t blame the dog for something that we taught it.
- Don’t reinforce the behavior.
- Reinforce/reward alternative behaviors instead.
Myth: Owners should always exit doors first to show leadership.

Fact: Animal just wants to get outside quickly.
- Animal isn’t batting you for alpha status.
- There are no doors in the wild.
- Redirected aggression is a symptom of excitement, arousal.
- Simply wait for an alternative behavior, then open the door.
- If you compete, you’re teaching competitive behavior.
- Alpha male and female wolves often are last in line in order to keep an eye out for dangers, let the young do the hard stuff.

Myth: Owners should never sleep with their pets.

Fact: Pets love you. Sleeping together is a bonding experience.
- Reasons for not co-sleeping may involve parasites, dander, dirt, fungus.
- Dogs are social.
- Cats express acceptance, love, friendship by sharing same space.
- The “at eye level” argument is just unscientific mumbo-jumbo.

Myth: Owners must always maintain dominance over the pet.

Fact: No one likes a bully.
- Even wolves aren’t as rigid as we once thought (Dutchers).
- You get more out of a pet when you are fun to be with.
- Compromise should not be considered a bad word.
- No need to be firm, use harm voice in order to be effective leader.
- Leaders are calm, make good decisions and don’t get stressed easily.
- Dogs don’t do anything willingly that’s not fun.
**Myth:** Tug of war encourages aggression.

**Fact:** It's a game of cooperation, and excellent outlet for stress.
- Does the game of chess make you want to conquer a country?
- Naturally occuring behavior when scavenging.
- It's fun, excellent form of exercise.
- You can make up any rules you wish, so long as you reinforce behaviors you like and ignore the ones you don't. ... Drop and walk off.
- It's not about winning. Who wants to play a game where they are always a loser?

**Myth:** Pets soil the house out of spite.

**Fact:** No species pees or poops on something when they are mad.
- Rule out medical, psychological issue.
- Consider environmental antecedents.
- Follow positive based housebreaking protocols.
- Experiment with types of litter, boxes, location of boxes.
- Presence of animals outside of home, marking behavior.
- Consistency is key. We are training in a habit.

**Myth:** Pets destroy owner possessions because they’re spiteful.

**Fact:** Chewing feels good, an outlet for frustration and boredom.
- They love your scent. It’s familiar and comforting.
- It’s something fun to do, makes being alone less boring.
- Dogs love to chew and dig. Cats like to scratch, pounce, bite.
- Provide animal with mentally enriching activities [puzzles, boxes, cat trees].
- Consider day care.
- Another pet not always the answer.
Myth: Dogs feel guilty when they did something wrong.

Fact: They are responding to our facial expressions, tone of voice, body posture.

- They sense our disappointment.
- Past experiences tell them something uncomfortable is about to occur.
- Apology gestures can easily be mistaken as expressions of guilt.
- Anyone would feel awful if their best friend was upset, try to soothe them, tell a joke.

Experiencing behavioral issues with your cat or dog? Ask for a free consultation with our certified behavior consultant.

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