

5 COMMON MYTHS AND MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT DOGS THAT EVERY PET OWNER MUST KNOW

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Do you have a dog? Dogs have been for centuries and continue to be today one of the most common and beloved pets in families. They're gentle with children, can be housebroken, and provide protection against strangers and intruders. They do require some work but are relatively easy to care for.

In times past, dogs were used as workers on ranches and farms and assisted in hunting and even fishing as well. They were not just an amusement for the family but were necessary for its survival as well. But whatever their use, dogs are always loved and treasured as important members of the family.

It's interesting though that even at this late day and age, when humans and dogs have had literally centuries in which to interact, there are still so many myths and misconceptions about dogs that are very prevalent among owners, handlers and trainers alike. These misconceptions typically involve:

- what a dog is "thinking"
- how much a dog understands the words, tone of voice, and body language of the humans around her

- what makes a dog behave the way she does, whether it's just common behavior such as barking or sniffing things or more aggressive behavior such as growling or even biting
- how she views the humans in her life
- how she views other animals in the household
- the things that are important to her physically and emotionally
- what a human needs to provide for her in order for her to be happy, healthy, calm, and for her to interact and socialize well with the rest of the family
- how an owner should train her in order for her to be obedient and responsive but happy and content as well

Some of these misconceptions are harmless enough and of course some cannot actually be proven as being completely inaccurate - who is to say what a dog is actually thinking at any given time? - but others are so grossly inaccurate that they actually are harmful to the dog and its relationship with its owner.

Some dog owners may immediately be thinking, what's the point? Why worry about misconceptions when it comes to how your dog thinks or what "makes her tick"? She's just a dog, right?

In truth, any responsible owner should be concerned with what is going on between a dog's ears before even buying or adopting a dog. Only by realizing how dogs think, what makes them behave the way they do, and really understanding what they need for their own health and security can an owner do a good job in training and caring for that dog.

You might liken the situation to someone that is new at car ownership. You don't necessarily need a degree in automotive engineering or to be a certified mechanic but at the very least you should understand the very basics of car maintenance in order to keep your car running properly and in good repair for years to come.

So it is with your dog; you don't need to be an animal psychologist or have a degree in zoology to be a responsible pet owner, but you should at least have a basic understanding of how dogs function in order to have one that is well cared for and to have a good relationship with it for years to come.

Now that we've convinced you of why it's important to understand some basics about your dog, let's move on to what those common myths and misconceptions are when it comes to these beloved pets, and clue you in on the correct understanding of these things as well.

MISCONCEPTION: DOGS ONLY NEED FOOD AND SHELTER FROM THEIR OWNERS; ANY PLAY OR POSITIVE ATTENTION IS JUST A BONUS.

You may have heard that dogs are pack animals but probably don't fully grasp what this means when it comes to domesticated dogs.

Dogs run in packs in the wild for many different reasons. Part of this is for the protection of each individual dog which could be easily picked off or overpowered by a larger predator, such as a cougar. A pack of dogs could surround such an animal and fight it off whereas one dog alone is vulnerable. This protection would also extend to female dogs that are pregnant or that have recently given birth as they too would be especially vulnerable; their pups as well. Again, many dogs could protect these ones during this time but if she were alone in the wild she would no doubt be killed and her pups would have little chance of surviving as well.

But being in a pack serves a purpose for dogs more than just for protection. Dogs are actually social creatures and function better when they are in a group. Whether you believe in evolution or creation or something else, the point is that it is part of a dog's genetic makeup to be around other dogs or other creatures that will take the place of these dogs.

If you've ever seen a group of puppies at play, you know this to be true. If they were not social creatures they wouldn't enjoy that type of interaction - when was the last time you saw two fish playing with each other? But dogs have an inborn need to interact with other creatures and not just for the fulfillment of biological functions such as feeding and reproduction. Dogs need positive attention from other members of their pack just as much as humans need positive interaction and attention from other humans as well.

For domesticated dogs, the family now becomes its pack. Yes, it does need the family to provide it with food, water and shelter as it is not living in the wild where it can get these things on its own. But thinking that a dog only needs physical provisions from you is like thinking that a child only needs food, clothing and shelter from its parents or that people get married simply because it makes

more financial sense to do so. Children need love, direction, guidance, reassurance, and teaching from the parents and spouses get married for love and companionship as well. With dogs the need they have for attention, approval and love from their owners may not be as deep and involved as what a child needs from a parent or the bond that married couples share, but that need for emotional support is still there.

Why this is important.

Having the correct understanding of this common myth is important to any pet owner that may assume that their dog is perfectly fine being left alone all day or being isolated from other humans and animals as long as it has adequate food, water, and shelter.

While being left alone for some length of time is of course perfectly fine for a dog the same way that any human can be alone for a few hours without harm or damage, ignoring a dog for hours or days on end or not interacting with it on a regular basis can be hurtful and harmful. Dogs crave positive attention from their owners and if they don't get it regularly they can become skittish, nervous, agitated, frustrated, and of course begin to act out.

MISCONCEPTION: TO ESTABLISH YOURSELF AS THE ALPHA DOG AND MAKE YOUR DOG RESPECT YOU, HOLD IT DOWN BY ITS NECK, MAKE IT SIT AT YOUR FEET BEFORE YOU FEED IT, AND MAKE IT WAIT FOR YOU FOR A FULL MINUTE BEFORE YOU OPEN THE DOOR TO LET IT OUTSIDE.

Being the "alpha dog" or the one in control is important for any dog owner as it is imperative that a dog obey the rules of the house and heed the master's command.

However, being the alpha dog does not mean mistreating your dog in these ways. The reason we call these things mistreatment is because there is no need to physically dominate or injure your dog in order to establish yourself as its master, and doing something like making it wait before it can go outside and relieve itself is pointless and cruel - would you like it if someone locked the bathroom door and wouldn't give you the key for a full minute when your bladder was full?

Another reason that this is a misconception is because the alpha dog in the wild is more than just the leader or the dominant one. Other dogs look to the alpha for leadership and guidance, and the alpha also is the first one out during the hunt, the one that checks out potential dens for safety concerns, and the one that puts itself between the pack and any potential predators.

In this way other dogs learn to respect the alpha because he cares for it and takes care of it, not because he's so fiercely domineering over it. When there are out and out challenges to the alpha there may be some infighting or rough treatment, but this is the exception to the rule and something that is used only to fend off that challenger, not something that is done simply to establish who is or isn't the alpha.

When a human does these types of things to a domesticated dog it really accomplishes nothing except to frighten or confuse and even frustrate her. These things can also be thought of as being physically cruel; not being able to relieve yourself when you need to can lead to kidney and bladder infections, and having to wait for food and water is also damaging physically as well.

Why this is important.

If you try to establish yourself as the alpha dog or commander in any of these ways is going to damage your relationship with that dog permanently. Your dog will only wind up being afraid of you, and this will lead to her being skittish, nervous, angry, and eventually disobedient.

It's also important that you do understand the correct way to establish yourself as the alpha - by providing for your dog, caring for it when it's sick or injured, giving it food and water and shelter from the elements, protecting it from harm such as from visitors or small children, and by giving it positive attention and affirmation as well.

When you do this, your dog will then be naturally drawn to you and will respect you because it has genuine respect for you as its leader, not because it's afraid of you or is afraid of being denied food or water.

MISCONCEPTION: DOGS SPEAK ENGLISH!

It's almost comical sometimes to hear a dog owner speak to his or her dog, giving her commands in complete sentences and acting as if they're really having a conversation. The reason that it's funny is because obviously the dog doesn't

understand a word that owner is saying and really can't answer questions about why it chewed up mommy's favorite slippers or why it has such a bad attitude.

Some owners may immediately argue with this because they are able to train their dogs to perform simple commands when the owner instructs them. But in reality the dog truly doesn't understand the concepts of what it means to sit or roll over or fetch; the only thing the dog can really do is connect a certain action with a certain sound it hears from the owner's mouth (or other such signal).

Many years ago a scientist named Pavlov had a dog that he carefully observed would drool whenever he would prepare its dinner. Getting an idea of how dogs react and respond to certain signals, Pavlov conducted an experiment wherein he would ring a bell when he served the dog its dinner. Every dinner meant drooling from the dog and a bell sound from Pavlov. Eventually Pavlov then just rang the bell - and noticed that the dog would drool.

The point is that the dog had no clue what the bell meant; all he knew was that this sound signaled dinner time and so he would start to drool in preparation.

It's quite the same with any command you give your dog. When you teach her to sit, you say the word "sit" over and over again as you push her bum down on the carpet. She then associates the sound of the word "sit" with the action of putting her bum on the carpet. Soon enough you can stop helping her by pushing her down and simply say the word; she responds as she's been programmed to, with putting her bum on the carpet.

But in reality the dog doesn't understand what the action of sitting actually means; if you teach her to sit she can't then distinguish when you tell her to stand up or when you say "stop sitting," and so on. To her, the sound of the word simply means an action that's required on her part, and that's it.

Why this is important.

Thinking that you can teach a dog any command by simply talking to it or that you're really going to teach it anything by scolding it with big explanations of how this was a very expensive pair of slippers is ineffective and frustrating, both for you and the dog.

Training a dog involves demonstrating an action to it while you repeat the signal for that action, whether it's the word or a hand signal or some other type of sound or gesture. A common mistake among many first-time owners is to expect the

dog to understand the word itself or to think that if they just keep repeating it then the dog will eventually catch on.

Realizing that dogs only associate words with action and don't really grasp complex conversations and sentences should help with keeping training very simple and straightforward.

MISCONCEPTION: SINCE DOGS IN THE WILD EAT ANYTHING AND EVERYTHING, AND DOMESTICATED DOGS SEEM TO EAT ANYTHING AS WELL, IT DOESN'T REALLY MATTER WHAT YOU FEED YOUR DOG.

It is true that in the wild a dog's diet is rather repulsive to humans and domesticated dogs eat all sorts of disgusting things as well, but before you run down to the supermarket and buy whatever is cheapest or whatever you have a coupon for, consider a few things about dog food and treats first.

The first is that while a wild dog's diet is repulsive to humans, it's actually very safe and nutritious to him. The enzymes and amino acids in meat is perfectly suited to a dog's digestive system which needs far more protein than any human's.

Also, it may seem like a strange statement but the raw meat and vegetation that a dog gets in the wild is sometimes safer than processed and prepared dog food you get off the shelves of the supermarket. These products are loaded with sugar, added chemicals, and preservatives all of which are very bad for any dog.

This isn't to say that purchased dog food is necessarily unhealthy for your dog or that to be a responsible pet owner you need to go out and slaughter up some venison and bring it home, but it does mean that you need to do some thinking before you buy that food.

Knowing that a dog needs protein more than anything means that your choice of dog food should have meat as the first ingredient and preferably as the first two or three ingredients. Fillers such as corn or soy should be listed toward the bottom of the list of ingredients if they're on there at all.

A good mix of both wet and dry food is also important. Wet dog food has more oil in it and oil is important for a dog's skin, coat, eyes, and teeth. A lack of these important oils can mean dry skin, brittle fur, and dry eyes and teeth as well.

Having very dry skin is extremely uncomfortable for a dog as she can't just get up and put on some lotion the way humans do when they get dry skin.

Why this is important.

As a responsible pet owner you want to do everything you can to provide properly for your dog and to keep it from harm. If you knew there was a predator in the area you would probably bring the dog inside and keep it safe.

In reality, persons who buy very cheap dog food or don't pay attention to the ingredients are harming their dogs by bringing this product into their own home, just as much as if it were a predator.

It's also an interesting point that many pets today are actually suffering from the epidemic of obesity just as much as humans are! There has been a rise in the number of dogs, cats, and even rabbits and other unlikely animals that have been brought to the veterinarian's office with severe health problems as a direct result of being far too heavy for their size.

Some people immediately bristle or become defensive when it comes to the issue of weight, and certainly this is a very touchy subject for some. But remember that we're not talking here about making choices for your dog so that she can look as good as possible. We're talking about making choices for your dog that will keep her as healthy as possible since she can't make those choices for herself. Allowing her to become obese through no fault of her own is actually condemning her to a life of painful joints, diabetes, shortness of breath, and possible cancers and other serious effects of this. Making healthy choices for her food and keeping her weight in check is just as important as taking her to the vet for shots, putting a flea collar on her, and making sure she stays away from prickly and thorny bushes.

And when we talk about food, don't forget that we're also talking about treats and table scraps. These are usually as nutritious to your dog as a candy bar is to you! While there's nothing wrong with an occasional treat or a few scraps here and there, it's important to be honest about how much is actually "a few here and there." This means not every night, and certainly an entire meal should not be made up of scraps and treats!

Taking care of your dog physically means providing her with good food, not just cheap food. As a responsible pet owner you need to make sure you're taking responsibility for this.

MISCONCEPTION: AGGRESSIVE DOGS OR THOSE WITH SPECIAL BEHAVIORAL ISSUES ARE JUST BAD DOGS AND HAVE NO PLACE IN A FAMILY.

First of all, it is absolutely imperative that a dog prone to barking, fighting, or that otherwise shows any signs of uncontrolled aggression be separated and kept separate from young children, babies, elderly persons, and anyone else that may be vulnerable to an attack by that dog. It's tempting to think that the dog will be fine or to ignore signs of aggression but there have been far too many tragedies reported of those that turned on children or babies and caused great injury and even death.

For those families that do not have young children or other vulnerable ones then the issue of whether or not overly aggressive dogs can ever be trained is one to consider carefully.

Typically when you have a problem with a dog whether it's typical behavior problems or something more aggressive, the best way to train her is to figure out why she's acting this way in the first place.

As an example, suppose your dog barks incessantly. Remember that barking is a natural response by dogs when they feel threatened or when they're in communication with other animals. If you can socialize the animal more with strangers it may be calmer around people it doesn't know. Playing with the dog more often can also work out some of the tension the dog may have as well. If it can expend some energy in play then it may have less aggression around other animals and people.

Some dogs that have been abused or mistreated are just always going to be more defensive especially around behavior they find to be threatening. Sometimes there is not much you can do to fix this behavior other than to be sure that family and friends treat the dog gently and respectfully. Be sure the dog has plenty of time and latitude to check out any stranger before it gets petted. Young children are not good around formerly abused dogs because it's very hard to teach children how to be gentle with a dog and to remind them that this animal just might not play with them the way other dogs may. Smooth and gentle petting and grooming of the dog can also be reassuring and help it to stay calm and become more trusting. The key in this type of situation is patience, along with respectful boundaries. If the dog doesn't like to be petted or grabbed, then don't force it upon her. If she doesn't care for strangers and heads for another room when they arrive, let her go. This might not be what you imagined with a dog but understand why she's acting the way she is and you'll be more understanding.

It's also interesting how much of a need dogs have for entertainment and amusement. Humans can sit quietly and watch television for hours and be sufficiently entertained whereas dogs are meant to be physically active creatures and to be active every single day. When they're cooped up inside the house for hours at a time, even if this doesn't happen every day, they can become exceedingly restless, bored, and agitated. Their only outlet is to start scratching things, pawing in the trash, chewing on whatever they can find, and so on.

Why this is important.

Understanding all this is important because dogs need to be understood when it comes to their behavior. They never act out of spite so if they chew up your shoes or turn over the trash, they're probably just bored. They really don't know any better than to handle the situation this way.

Punishing a dog for doing what it does naturally is ineffective and borderline cruel. It can be like someone punishing you for sneezing or for scratching an itch.

But when you understand your dog, when you get past these common myths and misconceptions and really get a correct line of thought as to why your dog is the way she is, then you'll be a much more responsible pet owner. Not only that, training your dog will be much easier, much quicker, and much more effective. And the best reward of all - you'll have a much better relationship with your dog and both of you will enjoy each other's company that much more as well.

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