



Myths & Truths - Real World Examples

1. Myth: Dogs Just Want to Please People

(Truth: If It Works for Them)

Example: I worked really hard with my dog on emergency recall. I paired my emergency recall cue, "Star Trek!", with his favorite treat: rotisserie chicken. One day, he took off after a deer. I called out my emergency recall word, and my dog turned immediately and came back to me.

My dog stopped chasing the deer and came tearing back to me, not because he wanted to please me, but because he knew: "Hey, if I come back, something really really good will happen!" His coming when called does please me, but that's not why he did it. He did it because all those practice repetitions showed him that running to me is super fun, worth even more to him than a chance to chase a deer.

2. Myth: "It's ALL in How They're Raised" or It's ALL in the Genetics

(Truth: It's a Mixture of Both)

Example: I was training a service dog, and my team and I did everything right: proper socialization during her critical period; careful training with consistent rewards; lots of public training, etc. However, this was a donated puppy and neither of her parents graduated as service dogs. Both parents startle at unexpected noises and respond to stress by bolting. Even though we did everything "by the book" in our young dog's upbringing, and she was able to learn training cues on a high level, she still did not make it as a service dog because of the fear and startle response issues. All of our training couldn't overcome the dog's genetic tendencies. Behavior is influenced by DNA and training.

3. Myth: Dogs are "Little Wolves", Domesticated by Humans

(Truth: Wolves are Very Different)

Example: I went to a zoo where they had wolves in a large enclosure. The wolves came nowhere near the people, and seemed to have no interest in them whatsoever. If anything, they were as far away from the people as possible. Dogs are completely different from wolves behaviorally.. Any dog I've ever walked past in my neighborhood is either extremely interested in meeting me, or barking at me to get off their territory!

4. Myth: Dogs Should Always Be Social with Everyone (Truth: It Ranges; Every Dog is Different)

Example: My brother's dog Murphy is definitely a "one-person-dog". Murphy very much only has eyes for my brother, and if another dog wants to play or another person wants to pet him, Murphy always tries to leave the situation and return to my brother. Murphy's a great, well-behaved dog, but he just isn't interested in new people.

By contrast, another dog I know of the same breed, Quest, is totally different from Murphy. Quest enjoys every person and dog who walks in the room. Quest often leaves his owner and instigates interaction with everyone. These two dogs are very different, and both are normal. Sociability has a spectrum and is not the same for all dogs.

5. Myth: Dogs Experience the World Like We Do (Truth: Our Dominant Sense is Sight, Theirs is Scent)

Example: I was walking my dog by a bush when he started sniffing the ground frantically and baying. I didn't see anything at all, and I unsuccessfully tried to redirect him. Suddenly, from out of the bush, a rabbit dashed in front of us! I was looking right at the bush and I couldn't see the rabbit, but my dog could smell him, even without seeing he was there. This is just one example of how dogs are sensing and prioritizing totally different things than humans do, even when our dogs are right with us. A dog's perspective is different from a humans.

6. Myth: Dogs Know Right vs. Wrong (Truth: That "Guilty" Look is More Like Fear and Confusion)

Example: I had a client who said her dog knows not to urinate in the laundry room, but he does it anyway. Whenever he pees there, she scolds him loudly and he tucks his tail and runs to his crate. She said, "He knows exactly why I was mad and that he did something wrong."

Appeasement signals might look like guilt, but they are just a sign that the dog has connected the situation to punishment. To help her understand, I asked if he had peed in the laundry that day, and she replied that he hadn't. So, I asked her to coax him to walk to the laundry room with her. As soon as she did, the poor dog tucked his tail and ran to his crate and cowered.

I said, "He didn't pee in there at all today, so he didn't do anything wrong, but he still showed what you call a 'guilty' look. It's not guilt. It's fear and appeasement. He has just learned that whenever you approach the laundry room, you become upset with him, so he gets scared and confused. What you are seeing is his concern that punishment may be coming soon, not guilt.."

7. Myth: I Need to Be Dominant/Alpha (Truth: This is an Outdated/Oversimplified Approach)

Example: A family member told me that the reason my dog sleeps on my bed is because he is trying to be dominant over me. But I have a tile floor that gets really cold in the winter, so my dog climbs in the bed to be warmer and more comfortable. When I got him a raised and super

comfy bed and placed it in my room, he curled up there to sleep just as happily as he did in my bed. He just wanted somewhere soft and warm to rest that was still close to me.

8. Myth: A Good Dog Doesn't Chew Things (Truth: Most Dogs Need to Chew Regularly)

Example: My puppy used to love to try and shred my pillows. I decided to redirect her by giving her a box with treats inside and encouraging her to shred it. She needs to chew one way or another, so I show her what to chew by giving her things that are safe, appropriate, and fun. Now she leaves my pillows alone. Chewing is normal throughout a dog's life, so you have to give them opportunities to chew stuff they're allowed, or they will make their own.

9. Myth: Pet Dogs have Lost the Wild Instincts of Their Ancestors (Truth: They Haven't)

Example: A client shared with me how his dog, Aspen, plays appropriately and gently with dogs her size. If they yelp, Aspen respects that and stops. As soon as Aspen sees a little dog, however, she is more inclined to chase and grab at the little dog. The more the little dog yelps and runs, the more Aspen wants to chase. This instinctive behavior pattern appears whenever Aspen sees a small furry animal, even if it's a dog.

Another similar example is small companion breeds like Havanese that are thought of as lap dogs - they still have their hunting instincts and are as motivated and capable of catching a chipmunk as they are to lie on your couch. Modern dogs still have many of the same instincts as their ancestors, to one degree or another.

10. Myth: A Good Dog Would Never Bite (Truth: Dogs Use Their Mouths to Communicate)

Example: A friend of mine, Lena, has two dogs, Blaze and Spot. The dogs normally get along together very well. Recently, Lena became distressed when Blaze started air snapping, growling and even biting Spot whenever Spot walked too close to Blaze's food-stuffed Kong toy.

Lena didn't understand what was happening and said, "But they get along so well and Blaze is so sweet! Why has she turned mean and started biting Spot?!" I explained to her that it is normal for dogs to resolve conflict by displaying signals that say, "Hey that's mine!" This is just like if I'm hungry and someone tries to take the pizza slice off my plate, I'm going to tell them to back off, and protect my delicious pizza! It's not always pleasant to see, but growling and biting are natural parts of canine communication and are often used in ways that don't intend to cause harm.