

Behavior Tips: 5 myths about dog behaviour that need to go away

Myth 1: Dogs are evolved wolves

While dogs share a common ancestor with wolves, dogs and wolves actually evolved on their own separate paths, in their own separate ways and have different needs compared to each other. Ancestral dog remains have been found in archeological sites that show that, unlike wolves, these dogs lived in extraordinary close proximity with humans. Over thousands of years, humans selectively bred dogs for specific types of work. There are genetic fingerprints in dog DNA that suggest that at the same time, genes for neurochemicals involving social behaviour came to resemble those of humans, possibly enhancing the canine traits of friendliness and loyalty. This selective breeding created a massive difference between dogs and wolves. Dogs, unlike wolves, dogs also have genes indicating a large dietary shift to include more carbohydrates in their diets, like the humans they lived with. Comparisons of modern dogs and modern wolves (which are *not* the same wolves that gave rise to dogs) have shown profound differences in social behaviour and their behaviours with humans that are not dependent simply on exposure and experience. When behaviour changed in domestic dogs, so did how they look. Wolves fall within one size group, but the range of size across breeds is enormous... Chihuahuas and great Danes are the same species!. In contrast to wolves, modern dogs have a series of coat colors, patterns, lengths and textures, and only in modern dogs did floppy ears appear. By understanding the differences between dogs and wolves with respect to their evolutionary paths, we can better care for our canine companions and provide them with a much better life.

Myth 2: Dogs are “dominant” and so you must dominate your dog

In popular culture, aggressive dogs are often referred to as “dominant” dogs, while dogs that both figuratively and literally “roll over” are referred to as “submissive”. This is not an accurate representation of aggression, dominance or what dogs are doing when they roll over.

There are a number of theories of dominance and because many of them focus on choosing mates and defending resources in the wild, they are not relevant for pet dogs, but they all focus on establishing some kind of rule set for social behaviour. While agonistic signaling (barking, growling) can be part of social signaling in interactions and relationships between dogs, frank aggression is more common when the interactions and signals go wrong. Here, aggression is a problem – not a sign that you are dominant. Unfortunately, too many people have believed that dominance means aggression and the aggressive dog is simply being dominant, which is normal. The sad outcome of this mistaken belief is that such dogs have become riskier and riskier to humans and to other dogs. Whenever aggression becomes common, or people note that there seems to be a rigid and strict hierarchy in their house (only ONE dog can go out the door first or there is a fight), they likely have a dog in the mix who has a behavioural problem. When this pattern occurs in captive groups like zoo animals, it's almost always because they do not have enough space to allow normal behaviour. In households where social relationships are defined by this type of aggression, one or more dog has a behavioural pathology – absent abuse - and they need help. It's *not* normal.

Are dogs who roll over “submissive”? No, submission implies doing something against one's will. Rolling over in a dog may serve as a tool of disengagement in both play and aggression. In play, research has shown that the dog who rolls over controls the length of the play bout and the direction of play which has nothing to do with “submission”.

Must we “dominate” our dogs? No. Aggression and force have little to do with social status and collaborative work. Physical and behavioural influence are based on relationships, cooperation and learning, not force. Force certainly can control behaviour through fear and violence, but relationships based on fear and violence are pathological. If we want a relationship based on trust, “dominance” does not work. Instead, reliability, protection and teaching dogs what we want and what causes rewards (food, love, praise, play) to appear are the best ways to have the best life with our best friends.

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Myth 3: A dog that is wagging its tail must be happy

The myth that a dog's tail wag signifies that it is a happy and friendly animal can have potentially serious consequences for those who believe this myth. In reality, a tail wag only means that the dog wishes to interact - not that the interaction will be friendly. To determine what the dog wants to communicate with their tail wag, we must look at the whole picture. A dog that holds its tail vertically while stiffly wagging it quickly may be aggressive. Often, these dogs will show other behavioral signs of aggression such as raised hackles or barking. A nervous or insecure dog may carry their tail low while wagging it slightly. A relaxed tail wag, or even a tail wag butt wiggle combination often indicates that a dog truly is happy to interact in a positive way. Of course, it is important to keep in mind that these signs can change rapidly as an interaction progresses.

Myth 4: Fear of loud noises is normal and it is okay to ignore it

Hyper-reactivity to loud noises in dogs has been normalized. This may be because up to 50% of dogs may be affected by an extreme reaction to noise in their lifetimes - most commonly due to gunshots, fireworks and thunderstorms. However, just because a large base of the population reacts in one way to a stimulus does not make it a physiologically normal reaction. Instead, we need to understand that the data show that dogs who are afraid of noises often worsen with age and exposure and that they suffer from their fear. The reactions dogs show – shaking, trembling, salivating, avoidance, hiding - are rooted in physiologic anxiety and confirm the dog's fear, discomfort and anxiety. Any dog showing these non-specific signs or others in response to any noise should have a veterinary consultation as soon as possible. Fearful reactions to noise are not benign and have been shown to affect social behaviour and problem-solving skills. Early treatment is the humane choice.

Myth 5: Behaviour is not a medical condition

Behavioural conditions are too often thought *not* to be medical conditions like heart disease, allergies, or infections. As a result, too often people think that they will fix themselves or that behavioural conditions do not require veterinary help. This is wrong. Behavioural conditions are medical problems and they can negatively affect our pets' health and lifespans, and may require treatments that only a licensed medical professional (like a veterinarian) can provide. Let's take a look at an example for some context.

Spots, a 2 year old female spayed beagle, has severe separation anxiety. When her people leave the house, Spots tears up the carpet, the baseboards, and has recently begun chewing on the walls. This separation anxiety is a true medical condition, even though it manifests as unwanted behaviours. These behaviours are associated with changes in neurochemistry, stress hormones and physiology at the molecular level that aids learning. Medical treatment with behavioural medications (possibly fluoxetine (Reconcile) or clomipramine (Clomicalm) may be exactly what Spots needs to feel better and to learn – using molecular ways to make new protein in regions of her brain involved in fear and anxiety – a better way to manage her concerns and to realize that she can be safely left. In this way, the behavioural condition is a medical condition, and benefits from proper medical treatment.

Like physical illness, mental illness is illness. Treatment is essential.

Although these tips are helpful, please discuss any behavioural/medical concerns with your local veterinarian. For all cases where you still have concerns, seek specialist services (www.dacvb.org). At AVC you can contact the AVC Behavioural Medicine Service (AVCBehaviouralMed@upe.ca).