

## Myth vs. Reality

Having a dog is rewarding, but it also comes with its own hurdles. We have so much information about dog behaviour available at our fingertips, and it can take a lot to sort through what is fact and what is myth. Sometimes what is seen as “Common Sense” isn’t actually sensible at all! Let’s break down some of these common myths about training and behaviour.

### **“Tail wags and kisses means a dog is happy!”**

Sometimes this is true... sometimes this is a myth! I’ve worked with many owners who were baffled when Fluffy bit the neighbour... “her tail was wagging, it didn’t make sense!” Tail wagging can be an indication of emotional arousal or excitement, but not always indicative of the true underlying emotion - or a signal of what might happen next. The tail wag needs to be taken in the full context, both of body language (does the dog have a soft, wiggly expression in their body? Or hard, tight-mouthed rigidity?) as well as knowing how a dog has responded in similar situations in the past.

The same is true for licking. Licking can be a socially affiliative behaviour, which is what we call kisses. But sometimes licking is indicating that the dog needs space. Again, the broader context will have the answer. A dog who is wiggly-bodied with a soft, squinty expression is likely to be licking in an affiliative way. A dog who has had her space intruded upon and licks the person, then turns away, is likely asking the intruder to step away. Likewise, a little flick of the tongue in a stiff-bodied dog with a furrowed brow and a hard gaze means you need to get the dog out of that situation ASAP!

### **“I’ve had dogs before so I don’t need to go to training class with my new adoption.”**

This is truly one of the toughest things to hear as a trainer! Even if you’ve had five dogs before this, five dogs is a very small sample size on which to base an opinion of how to raise, train and live with a species of animal. There’s so much variation between dogs, even those of the same breed, that there is always more to learn. Every professional trainer I know seeks out continuing education opportunities with other trainers, and will attend classes, seminars and webinars to continue learning about training and behaviour. If pro-trainers can find more to learn after decades of experience, so can you!

### **“I only adopt puppies, because I can shape them into whatever I want as they grow up.”**

If only it were that simple! Every dog is a product of both “nature and nurture” - never exclusively one over the other. Not only that, we humans don’t get to choose which traits will be malleable, and which will be resistant to change (for example, propensity toward fear, reactivity, aggression, separation issues, resource guarding, etc.) This fact is why we can breed dogs that exhibit specific tendencies in a line or breed - these are heritable, genetic traits!

Thinking we have control over exactly what our puppies will develop into can be a dangerous idea when it comes to selecting the right dog for your home. While there are many things that are yet to be seen in a young pup, what can be profiled when it comes to behavioural tendencies (whether in the breed or in the individual) and the dog’s needs must be taken into account when seeking out the right pup for your home.

Likewise, thinking that any puppy can be molded into exactly what you want leaves older adoptable dogs out in the cold. A foster home can tell you so much about a mature dog who has been in their home for long enough to settle in and let their true selves show. With this information, you can often better determine if this mature dog is a fit for your home, versus guessing at the future traits that may develop in a puppy as she matures!

### **“Some dogs just need a heavier hand.”**

This is usually reserved as a description for aggressive dogs and “tough breeds” (whatever that means!). Have you ever noticed that when you fight fire with fire... you end up with a bigger fire?! The same thing often happens with dogs. I’ve worked with many aggressive dogs who were made worse through heavy-handed training, because it gives the dog a reason to act in self-defense. Quite often, the training looks like it “solves the problem” because the correction inhibits the behaviour, only to have an explosive increase in aggression down the road. The dog’s only strategy for dealing with overwhelm (barking/lunging/etc.) has been taken away, and on top of that, they experience increased stress from the training itself in addition to the stress of the original trigger. Like a pressure cooker, a dog may flip her lid when that stress builds up.

This can easily be avoided by using your brain instead of brawn in training. I once received an email from someone who was at the end of his wits with his aggressive dog who was getting worse with corrections. He signed off with “I have tried literally everything except a professional trainer.” If it seems like you are out of options and that heavy-handed training feels like the “tough love” you need, just take a step back, take a deep breath and seek out a new perspective and new resources! There is so much support available to owners who want to get to the root of their dog’s stress, rather than just shut them down.

Every breed and every dog is different – just like people! The key to a successful relationship with your dog is to ignore the “myths” and get to know your dog intimately. What works, what doesn’t work, what triggers her, what calms her. Seek professional guidance with a force-free trainer to continue the education of both you and your dog. This will enable you to work as a team towards the best, most mutually rewarding partnership with your canine companion.



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