

Training Myths That Hurt Your Dog: What Science (and Our Dogs) Really Say

Bringing home a new dog is exciting but it's also a big responsibility. You want to do right by your dog, but there's a world of advice out there, some of it outdated or rooted in myths. Some of these myths not only fail to help - they can actually harm your dog's wellbeing.

One of the most powerful shifts in dog training and behaviour work today comes from understanding dogs as whole beings. As a Licensed Family Dog Mediator, I use the L.E.G.S. model developed by Kim Brophy, which helps us look at a dog's behaviour through four crucial lenses:

- **L = Learning** – Everything the dog has learned so far in life
- **E = Environment** – The dog's current surroundings and context
- **G = Genetics** – Breed traits and inherited tendencies
- **S = Self** – The dog's unique personality, health, and experiences

When we look at dog behaviour through L.E.G.S., we see that it's never as simple as "obedience" or "stubbornness." Dogs are complex animals with needs and instincts shaped by nature and nurture, and it's our responsibility to help them thrive.

Let's debunk a few of the most persistent training myths and discover what science really tells us about helping our dogs thrive.

Myth #1: "You need to show your dog who's boss."

This old belief comes from a dominance theory, which claims dogs are always trying to become "alpha." People are told to use harsh corrections, or rituals like eating first or walking through doorways before the dog.

Reality:

Dominance theory is outdated and has been debunked by modern research. Dogs are not plotting to overthrow your household; they're trying to feel safe, meet their needs, and navigate a world they often find confusing.

From a L.E.G.S. perspective, many so-called "dominant" behaviours are driven by a dog's genetics, learning history, stress levels, or unmet needs - not a power struggle.

Myth #2: "Punishment stops bad behaviour."

People often believe that yelling, leash corrections, or shock collars will "teach" a dog to behave.

Reality:

Punishment might stop a behaviour briefly, but it doesn't teach the dog what to do instead and often causes pain, fear, stress, or aggression.

Positive reinforcement, on the other hand, builds trust, helps dogs learn faster, and supports their wellbeing. Training should always avoid fear or pain, so dogs feel safe as they learn.

Myth #3: “Dogs know when they’re being bad because they look guilty.”

That “guilty look” - cowering, tucked tail, and avoiding eye contact is often mistaken for a confession.

Reality:

Dogs don’t feel guilt the way humans do. That look is appeasement behaviour, a dog’s way of saying, “Please don’t be upset.” They’re reacting to *your* tone, posture, or facial expression - not remembering the chewed shoe from hours ago.

Understanding L.E.G.S. helps here, too: If a dog has learned that certain situations lead to scary outcomes (yelling, punishment), they’ll show appeasement signals even if they’re confused about why you’re upset.

Myth #4: “Dogs should just listen - training treats are bribery.”

Some people think using treats is spoiling a dog or bribing them into obedience.

Reality:

Reinforcers like food, toys, or play aren’t bribes. They are how learning works, scientifically speaking. Rewards build neural pathways and help dogs learn which behaviours “pay off.” And from a welfare standpoint, positive reinforcement training is humane and enjoyable for dogs. It’s a way to create a cooperative relationship, not a power struggle.

Myth #5: “If a dog doesn’t obey, they’re just stubborn.”

Many people think their dog is “stubborn” if they don’t comply with commands.

Reality:

Dogs are rarely stubborn. More often, they’re:

- Confused about what’s being asked
- Overwhelmed or fearful
- Distracted by the environment
- Not sufficiently motivated or reinforced

Through the L.E.G.S. lens, we consider: What learning history might influence their behaviour? Is the environment too stimulating or scary? What does this dog’s genetic makeup predispose them to? Is the dog feeling well physically?

Training works best when we *listen* to the dog and set them up for success.

Welfare: Creating a World That Meets Your Dog’s Needs

Beyond training, it's crucial to consider your dog's overall **welfare**. Behaviour problems often arise when a dog's physical, emotional, and instinctual needs aren't being met.

Every dog comes with biological drives shaped by **genetics**. For example:

- Herding breeds often need outlets for stalking, chasing, and control games
- Scent hounds thrive on sniffing and tracking
- Guardian breeds may be naturally wary of strangers

Ignoring those traits can lead to frustration, stress, or behavioural issues. A beagle who's never allowed to sniff or follow scents will be frustrated and stressed, because an essential part of their wellbeing is missing no matter how 'well-trained' they appear.

Meeting your dog's needs might mean:

- Providing mental enrichment (puzzle toys, scent games, training games)
- Giving safe opportunities to express natural behaviours like digging, chewing, or sniffing
- Ensuring adequate rest and downtime
- Creating predictable routines to help dogs feel safe

Ultimately, **welfare is about the whole dog**. It's not just avoiding punishment, but actively creating a world where your dog can feel safe, fulfilled, and understood.

Dogs are complex, feeling creatures with unique genetic makeups, life histories, and personalities. Behaviour is never just "obedience" or "stubbornness", it's a result of many factors working together.

Instead of relying on old myths, we owe it to our dogs to embrace science, compassion, and a deep understanding of who they truly are. The L.E.G.S. model helps us see dogs as individuals and guides us to build lives and environments that help them thrive.

If you're struggling with behaviour issues or simply want to start off right, connect with a certified, force-free professional. Together, you can help your dog live a life full of joy, safety, and species-appropriate fulfillment.

Let's leave old myths behind and build a future where every dog can be seen, heard, and loved for who they truly are.



Corey McCusker-CPDT-KA, LFDM
Certified Dog Trainer
Licensed Family Dog Mediator
Muttz with Mannerz
www.muttzwithmannerz.com