

# Boroughbred Behavior Resources



## Issue: Behavior Myths

### **Myth 1: A wagging tail means a dog is happy**

Wagging tails are something many people think of as meaning a dog is happy or friendly. In reality, a wagging tail can have many different meanings. A tail wag can mean anything from the dog is happy to the dog is afraid, issuing a challenge, or giving a warning. While research has shown that different sorts of tail wags can have different meanings, what type of wag the dog is doing can be hard to interpret when meeting a dog. It is important to observe all of the dog's body language, which can be complex, to better interpret how the dog is feeling, taking into account the dog's body posture, mouth movements, ear set, vocalizations, and other cues. Dogs cannot communicate with us through speaking, so all of their body language is vital to understanding their emotions.

### **Myth 2: Holding your hand out for a dog to sniff is a good way to greet them**

Many people believe a dog should sniff your hand as a way to get to know you. The truth is that a dog can perceive a hand extended towards them as a threat, and the hand presents a target for a fearful dog to bite. Even a hand with a treat in it that is extended towards a fearful dog can be seen as a threat. The best way to greet a dog is to act in a manner that poses as little threat as possible. Turn your body so that you are sideways to the dog (not looking directly at the dog), crouch down so your body is lowered, and speak to the dog in a calm voice. You can toss treats to the dog to help them be more comfortable. Allow the dog to make the first move and approach at their own pace. The dog should always make first contact with you.

### **Myth 3: When a dog rolls onto their back they want a belly rub**

While sometimes a dog that rolls onto their back does want a belly rub, sometimes this is not the case. Dogs can roll onto their backs for several different reasons. A dog may be exposing their belly as an appeasement gesture, attempting to demonstrate that they are not a threat by having a low body that seems less threatening. When this is the case, rubbing the dog's belly is the opposite of what they want and can lead the dog to react in a defensive manner. As with tail wagging, it is essential to look at other aspects of the dog's body language to ascertain what an exposed belly means. When in doubt, don't rub the dog's belly. Instead, call the dog over to you in a happy manner and see if they want to interact.

### **Myth 4: Dogs who are allowed to go out the door before you or who are allowed to eat first will think they are dominant**

The existence of dominance in dogs is something that is commonly misunderstood which leads to people making assumptions about dog behavior that are not true. These assumptions lead to inappropriate training methods with potentially dangerous consequences. Dominance is a fluid concept that is constantly changing with individual dogs valuing resources differently and controlling access to the resources that are the most important to them. A dog that is dominant over other dogs does not control others through fear or punishment, but rather through a relationship of respect. Dogs are not seeking to dominate people. Dogs operate on the principle of doing what works. So if pulling on leash works, they pull. If jumping up gets them attention, they jump up. Rather than having a mindset of dominating us, dogs are doing what works to get what they want. We should reward dogs when they do what we want them to do and not reward them when they engage in behavior we do not want.

### **Myth 5: Feeding people food to dogs will cause them to beg**

Dogs do not know the difference between food made for people and food made for dogs, so feeding them “people” food will not teach them to beg. What will teach them to beg is feeding them food off of your plate. To avoid having a dog who begs at the table, never feed them food from the table while you are eating. Instead, give them their own food-based chew toy in another area of the home while you are eating. And if you want to incorporate healthy, dog safe “people” food in training your dog or giving them a special treat, no need to worry about them learning to beg from this either. Just make sure the food you are giving them is dog safe – check with your veterinarian if you are not sure.

### **Myth 6: Dogs pee inside out of spite**

Many people perceive housebroken dogs who pee inside as doing this out of spite or anger. This can lead to people becoming angry with their dogs and acting towards their dogs in an unkind manner. What is often actually happening in these situations is that the dog is peeing out of fear or anxiety. For instance, a dog that is locked out of a room and pees outside the room door is not angry but is anxious about being suddenly locked out of a room. A dog that pees after being yelled at is not being vengeful but is peeing out of fear. Dogs do not act out of revenge and spite. When we recognize the real reasons they are having accidents we can more appropriately address the behavior. Next time you lock your dog out of a room or leave the house, leave your dog with a high value food-based chew toy to help alleviate this anxiety.

### **Myth 7: Dogs know when they did something wrong and look guilty**

You come home and you see that your dog has ripped apart your favorite shoes. You are angry and assume your dog knows what they did wrong because they look guilty. This is not the case. Dogs live in the moment, so any reward or punishment must be done within a few seconds of the action for them to make a connection between what they did right or wrong. Unless you see the dog in the midst of tearing apart the shoes, there is no way for them to know what they did wrong. That guilty look you see from your dog is likely your dog’s response to your anger or being upset that the shoes have been destroyed. The dog does not know what they did wrong, just that you are upset. The only thing you can do now is prevent this from happening in the future. Make sure your shoes are put away or crate train your dog to make sure it does not happen again.

### **Myth 8: Fearful or aggressive dogs have been abused**

While it is true that an abused dog can display fearful or aggressive behaviors, the majority of dogs with these behaviors have not been abused. Fear and aggression in dogs are things that occur for a few different reasons, or a combination of these reasons. There is a genetic component to fear where some dogs are predisposed to have a fearful disposition due to traits that have been passed down to them. There is also a component that happens in utero. If the dog’s mother was very stressed while pregnant, the fear she experienced can have a lasting impact on the dog’s predisposition to be fearful throughout their life. The next component to this is socialization. A dog’s critical socialization period occurs roughly between three and sixteen weeks. In this short window, anything that happens to a puppy will have a greater impact than any other time in their life. A lack of exposure to things can also lead to a lifelong fear of them. So a dog who is not exposed to strangers, or to certain types of strangers (children, men, older people, etc.), to loud noises, or to other dogs, can develop fear towards them that can be expressed in some dogs as aggression. This is why socialization and having positive experiences is so important during early puppyhood. Most often, fear comes from a combination of some, or all of, these factors.

### **Myth 9: You can’t teach an old dog new tricks**

This myth has permeated our culture and become a saying used regularly. However, it is not true and believing it can prevent people from experiencing the intelligence of a senior dog. The belief that senior dogs are not able to be trained can also prevent people from adopting a senior dog, when in fact senior dogs can be highly trainable, wonderful companions. Senior dogs can be taught new tricks just as any dog is taught a trick, with positive reinforcement training that rewards them for doing the action we are seeking. Some senior dogs may even catch on quicker than younger dogs who are often highly distracted. Just as senior people are perfectly capable of learning new things, so are senior dogs. Don’t let this phrase confuse you because you certainly can teach a senior dog new tricks.