

OLD SCHOOL DOG TRAINING MYTH-BUSTING

1. **Myth: Because dogs are related to wolves, we should use wolves as model to understand dog behavior**

Reality: Dogs and wolves are two completely different species. Dogs diverged from wolves in the last 15,000 years and evolved as scavengers to live off human waste; the dogs that were less fearful of people had access to more food and developed a mutually beneficial relationship with humans.

Wolf packs are families that cooperate to hunt and look after the offspring, the alpha female and male aren't the pack leaders because they've fought to achieve that status, but simply because they are the parents!

It makes as much sense to use wolf behavior as a model for dog training as it does to look to chimpanzee behavior as a model to raise human children.

2. **Myth: Dogs are pack animals, organized by rank with the alpha dog leading the pack**

Reality: Dog social structure is highly fluid, in populations of street dogs they come together when it is beneficial to do so (for safety or access to resources like food at a city dump), however they are just as likely to live alone or in pairs.

Typically, the mum nurses the pups until they are 6-10 weeks old and then the pups are on their own to compete with the adult dog population for food and everything else dogs need. For dogs there is simply no such thing as a pack leader or an alpha.

3. **Myth: I need to eat and walk through the door first, so my dog knows I am the pack leader and will respect me**

Reality: As we've just learned, dogs don't have a pack leader, you don't need to eat before your dog does or walk ahead of them any more than you need to eat before your children do to "show them you are the parents."

Even if you were incorrectly using wolf behavior as a model for dog training (despite them being completely different species) this is simply untrue anyway; the highest-ranking wolves lead the hunt only a fraction of the time and don't necessarily eat first.

Dogs aren't dumb, they know humans aren't dogs and aren't looking to incorporate us into their pack structure, if such a thing even existed – which it doesn't.

4. **Myth: You shouldn't comfort your dog when they are scared because you will reinforce their fear**

Reality: Fear is an emotion and feeling scared is horrible enough, it's designed to be aversive and this is why it is an effective way of keeping animals out of harm's way. No amount of pats, treats, calm reassurance, or playtime will make it more likely for your dog to choose to feel panicked in the same situation in the future.

Think about it, if you got mugged at the supermarket and your friend gave you a hug and a cup of tea to comfort you, do you think you would be more likely to feel scared next time you went shopping? Of course not! Can you imagine instead if your friend ignored you and said "I know you are scared, but if I give you any sympathy you are just going to be more frightened next time you leave the house." I think that would be the end of that friendship!

5. **Myth: My dog isn't doing what I want because they are dominant**

Reality: In a word, no. Dominance is defined as *a relationship between two dogs at any given moment in time, in which one dog controls access to a particular resource and the other dog willingly defers*. Dominance is not an intrinsic personality trait or an aggressive display of force. While there's no such thing as an alpha dog, there is absolutely such a thing as dominance.

Here's an example: Dougie will share his toys with Abby and Murray but not with any new dogs, and he definitely won't share his favourite squeaky one, anyone can take Abby's food but no one can kick her off the double bed, Murray will let anyone use his beds but won't share if he's already on it, especially not the sofa or window seat, Dougie will let Abby share his biscuits but he won't let Murray and he won't let either of them share his bones, and Murray isn't sharing any food at all! What one dog values highly in one situation, they don't really care about in another, it is always changing between different dogs and the availability of different resources.

Rather than incorrectly labelling your dog as "dominant" for not listening to you, instead they might not be doing what you want for multiple reasons. Perhaps they are confused and don't know what you are asking (it must be so confusing us babbling away at them and often misinterpreting their body language), your dog isn't motivated to perform the behavior (would you do your job if you didn't get paid?), there's something much more interesting going on, or they are too anxious, over excited, or in pain to be able to learn at the moment.

Dogs do what works for dogs, they repeat behaviors that have resulted in good outcomes for them and avoid doing things that have resulted in unpleasant outcomes – there are no ulterior motives about taking over the family or being the king of the world nor being stubborn.