



#ALFACTS ABOUT DOG TRAINING AND BEHAVIOR

#ALFACT: Dogs are pack animals.

REAL FACT: Dogs do not form packs.

While dogs are certainly social animals, current research suggests that free ranging dogs (pariah, feral, and semi-feral populations) don't form packs. In fact, dogs form loose, amorphous, and transitory groups that do not have a clear social order. While the domestic dog (*canis lupus familiaris*) descended from wolves (*canis lupus lupus*) and coyotes (*canis latrans*), there is no evidence that dogs form the same structured familial packs observed in wild wolves.

#ALFACT: If a dog goes through a doorway ahead of you, they're dominant.

REAL FACT: This behavior has no significance to your relationship with your dog.

A dog rushing through a doorway is a dog that wants to get to whatever is on the other side. Dogs have four legs, and naturally move faster than us two-legged humans. There is no evidence that proves going through doorways first has any social significance to dogs.

#ALFACT: If you pet your dog when he's afraid, you're rewarding the fear.

REAL FACT: You can't reinforce fear.

Fear is an emotional state, not a behavior. Let's put it in human terms: if you're afraid of flying and you're biting nervously at your nails as you take your seat aboard a busy flight, you are exhibiting a fear-based behavior. If the person seated next to you hands you a fifty dollar bill in an attempt to get you to stop biting your nails, that reward won't make you more afraid of flying. Providing reassurance and comfort to a frightened animal (human or otherwise) is the most compassionate thing to do.

#ALFACT: You must punish your dog for growling or they'll become aggressive.

REAL FACT: Punishing a growl may worsen aggression; not alleviate it.

Dogs growl to communicate that something is upsetting them. It is part of a dog's warning system; a dog will growl in an effort to make the upsetting thing go away. If growling doesn't work, typically a dog will resort to biting. Punishing a growl simply suppresses it, and can result in a dog that bites without much warning.

#ALFACT: If your dog walks ahead of you he will become "Leader of the Pack".

REAL FACT: Dogs simply walk faster than humans.

If a dog is walking out in front of you, chances are that he hasn't been taught to walk with you. He's not trying to be "Top Dog"; he just walks faster than you.

#ALFACT: You must always eat before your dog or he will think he is dominant.

REAL FACT: The order in which you eat has no bearing on your relationship with your dog.

This comes from the old adage 'the dominant wolf always eats first'. Aside from the fact that dogs and wolves have different social structures, the claim that the alpha wolf always eats first is actually false. In fact, the hungriest wolf usually eats first. Even a low-ranking animal can defend its food until fully consumed.

#ALFACT: Positive reinforcement training doesn't work with aggressive dogs.

REAL FACT: Positive training techniques can effectively and safely modify aggressive behavior by addressing its underlying cause.

Dogs will exhibit aggression when they sense a threat, are frustrated, afraid, and a variety of other reasons. Punitive techniques typically suppress aggressive behaviors, giving you the illusion of a well-behaved dog, when in reality the root issue has not been addressed. Punishment-based training should be avoided, as it can increase fear, anxiety, and stress, and can lead to more pronounced aggressive behaviors.

#ALFACT: If you use food to train, you will always have to use food.

REAL FACT: You can vary reinforcers, including treats.

For many dogs, the fastest way to their brains is through their stomachs. Food treats are a quick and highly effective way to reward behaviors; you won't always have to use food! A competent reward-based trainer can teach you how to fade treats as your dog develops a true understanding of behaviors. You will learn how to vary the rewards, and add in new ones like play, attention, praise, toys or anything else your dog values. The strongest behaviors are ones that are continually reinforced, in one way or another!

#ALFACT: Playing tug with your dog leads to aggression.

REAL FACT: Tug has no relationship to aggression.

Tug is a cooperative behavior! It simulates collaboratively dismembering a prey carcass. The only study on this topic found no correlation between playing tug and the incidence of aggression directed at either family members or strangers. Tug is a healthy outlet for a dog's natural play instincts, and can actually strengthen the relationship between owner and dog.



#ALFACT: Shock, prong, and choke collars do not hurt.

REAL FACT: Shock, prong, and choke collars hurt, sometimes a lot.

Correction collars are designed to cause pain and fear, specifically through strangulation and blows to the neck. Because all animals learn by making associations, the fundamental premise of these collars is that the dog will avoid the behavior that caused the pain. In addition to the stress this creates for the dog, there is also a high risk of unintended and undesirable side effects, including aggression and negative associations with other things that your dog is around when they experience pain, including you and other dogs.

#ALFACT: Dogs can't start training until they are six months old.

REAL FACT: Dogs can start training as soon as they can eat.

In fact, the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behaviorists (AVSAB) advises, "enrolling in puppy classes prior to three months of age can be an excellent means of improving training, strengthening the human-animal bond, and socializing puppies in an environment where risk of illness can be minimized" (see AVSAB.org). During puppy hood you have a golden opportunity to instill good habits in your puppy. Reward based training in the first four months of life will have a lasting effect on your dog's entire adult life.

#ALFACT: Dogs are domesticated wolves, so you need to establish yourself as pack leader.

REAL FACT: Dogs are not domesticated wolves.

Dogs are not wolves, nor do they form packs. Interestingly, dominance and pack theory is based on research done in the 1930's and 1940's on captive wolves that were kept in sterile environments and in non-familial groups. Current research however, has debunked those earlier theories of dominance-based social structures in both wolves and dogs, but the "pack leader" sentiment has become so ingrained in the practice of dog training, despite the efforts of the scientific community. If you are interested in current dog and wolf research, a good place to start is the academic articles and books by biologist and wolf behavior expert David Mech.

#ALFACT: Certain breeds have to be trained with a heavy hand.

REAL FACT: Learning is neither breed, nor species-specific.

Putting labels on certain breeds does them a disservice, perpetuates stereotypes, and alternative facts. Training is about establishing trust in ALL dogs of all breeds, not about using force. There are no dogs who need a heavy hand.

