

## Problem Pooper? Put His Nose in It!

Written by Lisa Hartman  
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### Five persistent myths regarding dog behavior and what to do about them



Some myths just won't die. Regardless of the fact that they may have been proven beyond a doubt to be inaccurate, they are passed down from one generation to the next. In health matters, we've all heard "feed a cold, starve a fever," along with many other so-called remedies we would never think of using today. The world of dog training and behavior is no different. Below are some of the most common training myths and some answers for the problems at hand.

#### **If your dog has an "accident," you should show it to him and rub his nose in it.**

It is amazing that this piece of advice is still making the rounds. In truth you should *never* punish for such "accidents" or the dog may be afraid to potty in front of you. This can lead to sneaky behavior as the dog feels it is only safe to eliminate when you're not looking. Smacking the dog with a newspaper is just as bad.

Your touch and presence should be comforting to your dog, not scary! A better system would be to reward the dog for eliminating in the right spot, and supervise and avoid accidents in the wrong areas. After all, we know our dog has to go; it is where he eliminates that we care about. Accidents mean we goofed up somewhere and didn't take him out often enough or supervise him well enough.

#### **Aggressive dogs need a "firm hand."**

Most aggression stems from fear and a lack of socialization early on in the dog's development. The dog has had a bad experience or not enough experience with people, other animals, or specific situations. Furthermore, some aggression has been reinforced intentionally and unintentionally by the owner. An example of this is when the owner of a small dog pets her little precious and coos, "It's okay..." as the dog snaps and growls at the doorman. In a case like this, the dog is receiving affection and attention and being told it's okay to act uncivilized.

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Sometimes an owner punishes the dog for his aggressive display. But this only goes after the symptom (growling, biting, and so on), not the cause. The root of the problem is still there and possibly made worse by punishment and stress. In any case, the best protocol for aggression is desensitization and a counter-conditioning program in which the dog learns to be comfortable around and possibly even enjoy the object of his irritation.

**If your male dog “humps” you or another dog, he is trying to be dominant.**

Dogs mount for many reasons. The most obvious one is that they are aroused. If your dog is constantly mounting and isn't neutered, doing so will take the edge off and lessen the behavior. But even altered dogs hump sometimes, including female dogs. It is a natural action for animals and still enjoyable to do whether fixed or not. Sometimes it arises because of nerves or too much pent-up energy.

When I worked at shelters, I would let dogs in the play yard and they would mount other dogs -- male and female -- constantly. They'd been in a kennel so long they didn't know what to do with themselves during play time. Sometimes the mounted dogs cared, sometimes they didn't. You can also teach the dog to respond to “Off!” or another command that tells him you would like that behavior to stop.

**If your dog growls or snaps at you when you try to take something away from him, he is trying to be “alpha.”**

If I ask ten people what *alpha* means to them, I'll get ten different answers. Actually we contemporary trainers rarely if ever talk in those terms. I don't. But thanks to the transmission of old, bad information, terms suggesting pack rank are kept alive for new generations of dog owners.

Dogs hold onto items and try to keep them from you because they are important to them. It's called “resource guarding.” This is a hard-wired behavior that would keep a dog alive in the wild. He certainly wouldn't last long if he gave up his dinner and safe living spot to any animal who desired it.

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Getting angry and taking items from him may exacerbate the problem. Now the dog may consider you a threat, a thief who takes all things important, and he'll hold onto his possessions more tightly. A better course of action would be to teach the dog that it pays off extremely well to give up things through careful and systematic training and a behavior-modification program.

### **If your dog jumps on you, you should knee him in the chest.**

The dog only wants to say hello to you! Hurting him would not be the answer. A kinder strategy would be to teach him a more mannerly way to say hello and get your attention, such as a "sit to greet." The dog is taught that the only way someone will acknowledge him is if his butt is firmly planted on the floor. With a little practice and the reward of getting to greet you (you now reach down to pet him), most dogs pick this up in no time.

There is usually a bit of legitimacy or reason behind "old wives' tales" and myths. That's how they came into existence. But just like swallowing a spoonful of turpentine to fight illness, we usually have a more modern explanation and a better solution to the problem.

*Lisa Hartman is head dog trainer and founder of Pawsitively Pets. You can reach her at [pawsitivelypetsonline@yahoo.com](mailto:pawsitivelypetsonline@yahoo.com) or [www.pawsitivelypetsonline.com](http://www.pawsitivelypetsonline.com). You can also keep up with her and her dogs on Facebook at [www.profile.to/dogtrainer](http://www.profile.to/dogtrainer).*

Feedback: [letters@biscaynetimes.com](mailto:letters@biscaynetimes.com)