

Some Common Myths About Animal Behavior

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Below are five statements about animal behavior. Test your knowledge by deciding whether each is true or false.

1. Neutering a dog removes his sexual desire.
2. A dog wagging her tail will not bite.
3. You can't teach an old dog new tricks.
4. Cats instinctively hate dogs.
5. Cats stop using their litter boxes when they are mad at their owners.

All of these are false myths about animal behavior. Neutering in animals takes away their ability to breed but may not take away their sexual desire. There is much individual variation between dogs in their response to neutering. Some dogs lose interest in females in just a few weeks, others may continue courting and trying to mate for years. The wag of a dog's tail tells nothing about her aggressiveness. It simply is a sign of excitement. A dog wagging her tail may be excited to play with you or excited to bite you. Other aspects of her behavior can tell more about aggressiveness such as ear position, whether the dog is staring, growling or barking.

Old dogs and old people continue to learn throughout their lives, although it may be harder to teach old dogs some things because what they've already learned can interfere with the new learning. Very old dogs may not learn well because their ability to communicate may be impaired by progressive blindness, deafness or motivational problems. Cats don't instinctively hate dogs or anything else. Their early socialization experiences seem to be the most important in determining with whom they will be friendly or fearful. Cats raised around friendly, gentle dogs can develop strong attachments to them and be quite friendly with them. Anger doesn't seem to have anything to do with a cat's litter box habits. Bad experiences in or near the box, lack of adequate cleaning or changes in the cat's preferences seem to be the most important factors in leading a cat to abandon the box.

Myths like these are often based on incomplete or erroneous knowledge and can lead people to misunderstandings and mistreatment of their animals. It's important to have accurate knowledge to understand your pet and to deal with behavior problems. Got a myth about your favorite animal? Write and share it with us. We'll try to discuss more behavior myths in future columns.