

Words That Wound Your Dog

Words you use to describe a dog's behavior can influence how you treat your pet - and not always for the better. It's much more than a matter of semantics.

By [estaff](#) - Published: August 8, 2016



“My dog is vindictive,” clients tell Stephanie Borns-Weil, DVM, who heads the Tufts Animal Behavior Clinic.

“Every time I go out, he [pick one] pees on the floor; trashes the house; overturns the garbage can.

“This assumes that dogs plot to get back at you,” she says, “causing destruction or

eliminating in the house because they’re angry that you left and seek revenge. It’s a major misunderstanding.”

Why? Because revenge is a human thing, not a canine one. Dogs just don’t go there.

But saying a dog wants to get you back for something you did is more than incorrect. It can fray your good relationship with your pet. The reason is that when you ascribe negative motivations to a dog that aren’t there by using the wrong word or words, you can end up abusing him, or at least not treating him well. You keep reinforcing a faulty, negative notion in your head with language that misses the mark.

It happens all the time, and people tend to misuse the same words over and over. Herewith, some of the more common ones used incorrectly to attribute specific motivations to a dog’s behavior — and the right way to think about those often misunderstood actions on your pet’s part.

Vindictive. A dog who trashes the house when you are gone is not angry at you. “He’s anxious,” Dr. Borns-Weil says, and may be suffering from some degree of separation anxiety. Remember, he completely depends on you for company, for food, and for other resources. And when you leave, he may feel himself at a terrible loss. He can’t turn on the TV and enjoy the daytime soaps. He can’t read a good book. He has nothing to do but listen to the clock tick. For some dogs, that’s just too much to bear comfortably. They act on their anxiety by causing some destruction. They don’t mean to get your goat. They are looking for a way to relieve their nervousness.



If you come home and respond to the mess your dog has created as if he did it on purpose to upset you and then yell at him or worse, all your pet knows is that he’s both anxious when you leave and nervous when you come back. You’re literally punishing him for feeling lonely and afraid without you.

Some people say that no, dogs do know what they did wrong because they feel *guilty*. They can see it in their dog’s posture when they arrive back home; he puts his head down and averts your eyes. But that’s not guilt. That’s worry and fear. All the dog knows is that something is making you angry. And he’s very literal about it, Dr. Borns-Weil says.

For instance, if your dog urinates on the floor whenever you’re out and you come back home and throw a fit or even just get annoyed, he’s not associating your anger with his behavior. He’s associating it with the urine that you’re angrily cleaning up or shoving his nose in. “If he didn’t void in the house while you were away but someone came in and poured some urine on the floor, he would still feel afraid when you came home,” Dr.

Borns-Weil says. He would know that urine makes you inexplicably angry, not what he did. After all, he only urinates indoors out of anxiety rather than to make you feel peeved.

Dominant. “My dog tries to be dominant” is a big one, Dr. Borns-Weil says, along with, “my dog wants to be the *alpha*.” But those words, when applied by people to dogs, are generally completely misunderstood.

When we think about “dominance” and “alpha” in terms of people, we tend to think of those with a lot of swagger, those who want to “win” and lord it over others. “It’s an ideology that some people, even some trainers, extend to dogs,” comments the doctor. And it plays well to the public: “you have to be man enough to put a dog in his place and show him who’s *really* the alpha,” as she explains that approach. “It’s an enduring and old-fashioned narrative that’s very appealing to television audiences. It’s entertaining. And it’s not fair to the dog. I wouldn’t look to the television version of the alpha view of dogs any more than I would look to the Sopranos as an appropriate model of family interaction. As entertainment, it’s one thing. As training instruction, it is ineffective and harmful.”

Why is that? Dominance in dogs has nothing to do with throwing your weight around, about so-called alpha status. It’s simply about having priority access to resources, first pick, shall we say. And it’s not about one dog having all the first picks. Different dogs in a group might have first dibs on different things — food, the best resting place, a female dog in heat, and so on.

In other words, Dr. Borns-Weil says, “dominance in dogs is not about jockeying for overall status but a collection of interactions that shuffles dogs around to the ‘front’ and the ‘back’ depending on what other dogs are in the mix and what is important to them. It’s a *relative* term when applied to dogs rather than a *static* one, changing not only from dog to dog within a group but also from situation to situation even when it involves the same two dogs.

“It can even be hard to tell which dog is dominant in a group,” remarks Dr. Borns-Weil, “because it all depends. If it’s a dog’s number one concern to be on the couch, he might end up getting first dibs on the couch. Yet if another dog walks up to his food bowl and starts eating from it, that same couch-seeking dog will just walk away because he doesn’t care about that. In that instance, the dog who prizes food becomes dominant.”

People think a dominant dog is the most aggressive one, Dr. Borns-Weil says, but dominance in the canine world is really about confidence and deference — letting things go when they’re not important, not sweating the things considered to be the small stuff. Dominant *people*, on the other hand, are sometimes aggressive. They may expect deference at all times from others and engage in bullying in order to get it. The prize is lording it over others, not this or that resource that’s particularly important to them.

The harm in the lack of understanding about dominance in the canine world comes in people’s misperception that they and the dog are part of the same pack and that they have to show the dog who’s really the alpha. “It leads to a lot of unnecessary harsh behavior and punishment,” Dr. Borns-Weil says, because the owner’s goal becomes suppressing the dog’s supposed but non-existent belief that he comes first. That ideology says that an owner can give to but also take anything away from a dog at any time.

“It’s confusing to a dog,” she says, “and unfair.” Why would you take away a dog’s food while he’s eating? Why would you bark at him to give you a toy he’s enjoying? Dogs, just like people, don’t understand that kind of behavior, and it can make them misbehave in their confusion, only worsening the problem because the owner sees the misbehavior as intentional pushback when the dog is simply trying to cope.

Some people even say a dog is trying to be dominant by leaning against his owner. “That’s not dominance,” Dr. Borns-Weil points out. That’s trust. That’s bonding.”

Dogs do need *rules*. They are opportunists, Dr. Borns-Weil says, and will take advantage of openings to get more food or “talk you into” doing whatever else you may not want to

do. So you have to be clear about expectations and how the household is run. Providing that clarity will actually make a dog calmer, and it does let him know that he'll be okay with your leadership. But that's different from "lording it over" him.

Vicious. "'Vicious'" is an old legal term for certain dogs," Dr. Borns-Weil says. "Some towns still have laws about controlling 'vicious dogs.' I wish they would expunge that phrase from the law."

"Dangerous" would be more appropriate, she says, "I've certainly met plenty of dangerous dogs. The problem with 'vicious' is that it ascribes a meanness to dogs. If you say someone's a vicious gossip, you are signifying that they mean harm, that they're being careless about other people. That's a human problem. Dogs are not intentionally mean.

When a dog acts aggressively — which is simply describing his behavior rather than attributing motivation — he is feeling threatened. He believes someone, or some dog, intends to cause him harm. Aggressive behavior can also be based on anxiety about guarding resources," Dr. Borns-Weil says. "But dogs never seek to harm anyone for the sheer joy or titillation of causing harm." It's important to get to the root of the problem so the dog will not feel the *need* to act aggressively.

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**—Stephanie Borns-Weil, DVM,
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Stupid. To say a dog is stupid denotes “a misunderstanding of dog cognition and a very narrow view of intelligence,” Dr. Borns-Weil says. “They could say *we’re* stupid because we don’t smell a certain odor. I’d like to see a bomb-sniffing human discriminate between scents and then make sense of them.” Dogs have ways of interpreting the world that are useful for them — and clearly sometimes for us as well.

“There are dogs who are better and worse learners, just like among humans,” the doctor points out. But that said, she remarks that “most dogs are pretty trainable. You just have to be able to break up the task you want them to do into small enough pieces so the dog knows what he’s expected to do and be rewarded for. And you have to get the timing right. If you get a dog to sit and then he immediately stands and you give him a treat, you’re rewarding him for standing up. That’s what you’re teaching him to do.” That doesn’t make him stupid. It makes him an exquisitely attentive student.

“I think so much of what happens in situations where a dog is deemed stupid is a lapse in communication during training,” Dr. Borns-Weil says. “Yes, some dogs are so easy-going and ready to please that they kind of anticipate what you want, but others need more precision in the teaching.”

Willful. “I think dogs are willful in a way,” Dr. Borns-Weil says, but it’s not always because they are trying to assert their will. Rather, they are genetically wired to engage in certain behaviors, like chasing prey. “If you say ‘Come’ when a terrier is chasing a squirrel and the dog doesn’t come,” she explains, he’s not being willful in the way it may seem. “You’re trying to pull him out of his natural groove. It’s like saying a subway train is willful for staying on its rails.”

Seeming willfulness can also be about fear or anxiety. A dog may pull in one direction on a leash when you want to go in another because of fear or anxiety about something in the direction you’re aiming to go.

“Willful” can be about confusion, too, Dr. Borns-Weil says. “A lot of people try to reason with their dog with language, forgetting that dogs do not have a language center in their brains.” Words to them are simply cues, like a gong or a buzzer or a click. For instance, their name is not their name to them. It is just that sound you make when you are referring to them or want to get their attention. They learn to recognize certain sounds.

Thus, if you say, “No, left, left, — we’re not going to the park today,” or “Don’t jump, Mac, you’re getting paw prints on her dress,” that’s utterly meaningless to your pet “because it’s too imprecise.” You need to teach your dog the simple “Off” if you don’t want him to jump on people, and you need to give a gentle tug on his head halter or harness if you want to go in a different direction. Precise, direct cues will make him less “willful.”

In teaching your dog cues, you also need to reward him for achieving the behavior or action you seek. It’s “command, response, reward,” Dr. Borns-Weil says. “Without the reward, it’s like asking the dog to turn in a paper that never gets graded. Your pet needs to know whether he got it right.” Without that, there will be confusion and an inability to follow through on your command — which could be misinterpreted as willful.

Pig. This word is usually said in a joking way, but jesting about a dog’s seemingly voracious appetite provides the opportunity to miss the larger point, which is that in the absence of environmental enrichment that includes play time with you, the interaction that occurs with being fed is all many dogs have to look forward to from their owners. Feeding takes on undue importance; a dog wants to get food from you as a way of connecting with you. Owners who spend lots of time with their dogs — taking them on more than two walks a day, throwing a ball or Frisbee for them, grooming them, petting them — often have less food-seeking pets than those who pretty much leave their dogs to lie around like pillows except for two short walks a day.

Of course, the same lack of environmental enrichment that makes a dog look so forward to the interaction of being fed also leads to the boredom that makes him want to eat. It's true for people, too. Boredom, or tedium, leads to overeating.

Consider, too, that we feed dogs in a very regimented way, when that's not how they are hard-wired genetically. In the wild, dogs scavenge. Like their ancestors the wolves, they eat when food is available, knowing instinctively that they may go without for several days afterward. That instinct to eat as much as possible when food is available does not disappear in your kitchen. Even though it doesn't serve a dog who is a pet, he's still genetically primed to seek and wolf down food when he can.

Labs are some of the so-called bottomless pits that are thought of as piggish about food. But, Dr. Borns-Weil notes, some Labs have a genetic defect that does not let them truly experience satiety. "That's why you see so many obese Labs," she says.