

## **Talk Softly and Carry a Carrot or a Big Stick?**

By Jean Donaldson, Director of The SF/SPCA Academy for Dog Trainers

Dog training is a divided profession. We are not like plumbers, orthodontists or termite exterminators who, if you put six in a room, will pretty much agree on how to do their jobs. Dog training camps are more like Republicans and Democrats, all agreeing that the job needs to be done but wildly differing on how to do it.

The big watershed in dog training is whether or not to include pain and fear as means of motivation. In the last twenty years the pendulum swing has been toward methods that use minimal pain, fear or intimidation - or none at all.

The force-free movement has been partly driven by improved communication from the top. Applied behaviorists, those with advanced degrees in behavior, and veterinary behaviorists, veterinarians who have completed residencies specializing in behavior problems are in greater abundance than in previous decades, and there is much more collaboration between these fields and trainers on the front lines. These two professions are quite unified on the point that the use of physical confrontation and pain is unnecessary, often detrimental and, importantly, unsafe. On a more grassroots level, trainers have found more benign and sophisticated tools by boning up on applied behavior science themselves. Seminal books like marine mammal trainer Karen Pryor's *Don't Shoot the Dog* made the case that training and behavior modification can be achieved without any force whatsoever.

But dog training is currently an unregulated profession: there are no laws governing practices. Prosecutions under general anti-cruelty statutes are occasionally successful but greatly hampered by the absence of legal standards pertaining specifically to training practices. Provided it's in the name of training, someone with no formal education or certification can strangle your dog quite literally to death and conceivably get off scot-free.

It's not a complete wilderness: three sets of dog training guidelines exist, one in the Association of Pet Dog Trainers (APDT) Mission Statement, one published by the Delta Society and one by the American Humane Association (AHA). All state that less invasive (i.e. without pain or force) techniques must be competently tried and exhausted before more invasive techniques attempted. Such guidelines are not yet mandatory but they're a start.

And so the current professional climate is one laden with some remaining fierce debate. There's an ever-expanding group of trainers that train force-free (ad. literature will be some variation on the theme of "dog-friendly" or "pain-free"), trainers that still train primarily with force (ad. literature: "no-nonsense" or "common sense") and trainers that employ liberal use of both force and rewards (ad. literature: "balanced" or "eclectic"). From a consumer's standpoint, the choice in methods is wide.

You can hire a professional to train your dog pretty much any way that suits your fancy and it's all legal.

The force-free movement gains momentum every year and a sure sign of this is that many trainers in the other camps resort to murkier and murkier euphemisms to disguise their more violent practices and retain their market share. Stressed dogs aren't "shut down," they're "calm."

It's not strangling, it's "leading." As a committed devotee of the "dog-friendly" camp, I am therefore, along with my colleagues here at The San Francisco SPCA, somewhat agog at the stunning success of "The Dog Whisperer". This is pretty ferocious stuff by anybody's standards.

The National Geographic Channel even runs a disclaimer banner at the bottom of the screen admonishing people to "not try this at home," a warning notably absent on home improvement shows or "Nanny 911". Many have suggested that the cloaking of corporal punishments and hazing in mystical language, promise of instant results, high octane telegenicity of Cesar Milan and lucky connections with Los Angeles celebrity clients are sufficient explanation for the Dog Whisperer phenomenon. The one with the best buzz words wins. But I don't know.

Janis Bradley, my colleague here at The SPCA, sagely points out that the positive reinforcement trend has become a big enough juggernaut to warrant a backlash and Milan represents exactly that. Like the frazzled Los Angelinos in the film "Crash" (which, notably, took Best Picture honors at The Academy Awards last year), people are fed up with having to be politically correct in a chronically frustrating and disconnected world. Couldn't we just "get real" and stop being kind and tolerant all the time?

And here we positive-reinforcement oriented dog trainers are now telling everyone they have to be nice and politically correct to the dog? Well, yes.

(Jean Donaldson's article was first published in The Woofers Times, September 2006)

**READ MORE ABOUT CESAR MILLAN:**

[American Humane Association - "Dog Whisperer Training Approach More Harmful Than Helpful"](#)

[New York Times - "Pack of Lies"](#)

[Esquire Magazine - "Misguided Expert of the Year"](#)

[Andrew Luescher, DVM, Veterinary Behaviorist, Animal Behavior Clinic, Purdue University](#)

[Review of "Cesar's Way" from Pat Miller of \*The Bark Magazine\*](#)

[Paul Owen, the Original Dog Whisperer - "A Bone To Pick?"](#)

[Michael Linder - "Dog Owners Want To Bury Cesar?"](#)

[USA TODAY - "Dog Whisperer" Cesar Millan Sued by TV Producer](#)

[Newsday - "A 'Tough Love' Dog Whisperer Spurs Some Yelps"](#)

[The Anti-Cesar Millan -- Ian Dunbar's been succeeding for 25 years with lure-reward dog training; how come he's been usurped by the flashy, aggressive TV host?](#)

[IAABC Concerns Regarding Child Safety on National Geographic's Dog Whisperer Show](#)

**QUOTES FROM EXPERTS:**

World-renowned dog trainers, behaviorists and veterinarians had all warned National Geographic that Millan's methods had the potential for disaster. Below are quotes from noted experts:

"Cesar Millan's methods are based on flooding and punishment. The results, though immediate, will be only transitory. His methods are misguided, outmoded, in some cases dangerous, and often inhumane. You would not want to be a dog under his sphere of influence. The sad thing is that the public does not recognize the error of his ways. My college thinks it is a travesty. We've written to National Geographic Channel and told them they have put dog training back 20 years."

**Dr. Nicholas Dodman - Professor and Head, Section of Animal Behavior**

**Director of Behavior Clinic, Tufts University - Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine**

"Practices such as physically confronting aggressive dogs and using of choke collars for fearful dogs are outrageous by even the most diluted dog training standards. A profession that has been making steady gains in its professionalism, technical sophistication and humane standards has been greatly set back. I have long been deeply troubled by the popularity of Mr. Millan as so many will emulate him. To co-opt a word like 'whispering' for arcane, violent and technically unsound practice is unconscionable."

**Jean Donaldson, The San Francisco SPCA-Director of The Academy for Dog Trainers**

"A number of qualified professionals have voiced concern for the welfare of pet dogs that experience the strong corrections administered by Mr. Millan. My concerns are based on his inappropriateness, inaccurate statements, and complete fabrications of explanations for dog behavior. His ideas, especially those about "dominance", are completely disconnected from the sciences of ethology and animal learning, which are our best hope for understanding and training our dogs and meeting their behavioral needs. Many of the techniques he encourages the public to try are dangerous, and not good for dogs or our relationships with them ."

**Dr. Suzanne Hetts, Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist**

**Co-owner of Animal Behavior Associates, Inc., Littleton, CO**

"Cesar Millan employs outdated methods that are dangerous and inhumane. Using a choke chain and treadmill to treat fear of strangers and dogs is completely inappropriate. Hopefully the National Geographic Channel will listen to the scientific community and discontinue production of The Dog Whisperer."

**Vyolet Michaels, CTC (Certified Dog Trainer and Behavior Counselor)**

**Owner of Urban Dawgs, LLC of Red Bank, NJ**

"On his TV show, the main method Millan uses for aggression is aversives (leash jerks, kicks, snaps of the hand against the neck, and restraint, among others) applied non contingently. The aversives are non contingent because they are so frequent that they're not connected to any particular behavior on the part of the dog—the dog gets popped pretty much constantly. This results in a state called learned helplessness, which means the animal hunkers down and tries to do as little as possible. This is what Millan calls "calm submission." It's exactly the same thing you see in a rat in a Skinner box that is subjected to intermittent shocks it can do nothing to avoid.

This can happen quite fast, by the way, shall we say in ten minutes? The dangers to the dog are obvious, ranging from chronic stress to exacerbating the aggression, i.e., some dogs fight back when attacked. This latter is the simplest reason that aversives are a bad idea in treating aggression. Even used technically correctly as positive punishment for specific behaviors like growling and snarling, aversives do nothing to change the underlying fear or hostility, so the best you can hope for, in the words of famed vet and behaviorist, Ian Dunbar, is "removing the ticker from the time bomb." Thus such methods substantially increase the risk to humans of getting bitten."

**Janis Bradley, Instructor at The San Francisco SPCA Academy for Dog Trainers**

**Author of the book, "Dogs Bite"**

**Excerpt of letter from Lisa Laney, Dip. DTBC, CPDT, CBC to National Geographic before airing "The Dog Whisperer":**

"The intended program depicts aversive and abusive training methods - treatment for some serious anxiety and fear based issues - being administered by an individual with no formal education whatsoever in canine behavioral sciences. The "results" that are shown are more than likely not long lasting changes, but the result of learned helplessness, or fatigue, neither of which impact behavior to any significant long term degree - at least not in a good way. For those of us who are pioneering the effort to end the ignorance that drives the cruel treatment administered upon our canine companions, it is disappointing to see that this programming will reach the masses - especially on the NG Channel. The ignorance that this program perpetuates will give equally ignorant people the green light to subject their dogs to abuse. In turn these dogs will react even more defensively, will bite more people - and end up dead."

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