



"I SAID SIT!"
SCHOOL FOR DOGS

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The Power of Positive Dog Training and the Perils of Punishment

At lunch today, I was talking about a dog I was training. A friend said, "Don't you think a few good whacks with a newspaper ought to just about cure that?" As a behaviorist who has spent his career focused on developing and teaching positive dog training techniques it hurts me to think how often confrontational methods are used by laypersons. And even more troubling is that many of these people are learning these methods from professionals. Punishment addresses the symptoms of the behavior, not the cause. And not only is it less likely to solve problems it will often make them worse. I teach my clients that positive, reward-based training will elicit better behavior, is fun for both the people and the dogs and it won't have the detrimental side effects that come with "dominance" training.



Teach Your Dog What You Want It To Do

At the beginning of my 20+ year career, I was told to do things like "jerk him really hard, then praise him more to overcome the effects of the jerk" and "better she be afraid of you than whatever else she is afraid of" or "if that doesn't work, get a bigger rattle can." That advice seemed cruel and I was not going to do those things to any dogs. Why would we want our dogs to be afraid of us? What I embrace as being more effective, is to teach the dog what we want them to do, then reward them with praise, play, treats and affection.

Why Punishing Your Dog For Being on the Sofa Will Not Fix the Problem

Many people tell me they punish their dog for getting on the couch but, "It just doesn't get it." If you reprimand a dog when you find it on the couch, all you teach the dog is to be sneaky. It only takes one time on the sofa for the dog to learn for the rest of its life that the couch is wonderful.... except when you are around. They aren't thinking that they are leaving evidence. So no matter how many times you reprimand the dog, even if you see it get on the couch, the dog still knows the sofa is great when you aren't there. All it will have learned is to get off when you return. A better solution would be to teach it to wait before getting on the couch and reward it for going on its own bed.

What Can Go Wrong if You Try to Stop Your Dog from "Stealing?"

I have many dogs brought to me by owners complaining bitterly about their dog stealing things. In almost all cases these dogs belong to clients who make a concerted effort to be faster than the dog and prevent it from getting stuff in the first place. So what's the connection? By trying to beat the dog to the stuff, taking it away and telling it "no" the owner is actually reinforcing the wrong behavior even though they think they are reprimanding. But in the dogs mind this is a challenge and it knows it will get some attention. For some dogs it can even lead to fear issues. Wouldn't you be afraid if someone was running after you and screaming? But if we actually reward the dog for finding something, and teach it to share, we might just be able to get it back undamaged. Teach your dog to give you the item in return for something better, like a treat or dog toy. Then you can play with the toy and make "proper play" more fun than "mischievous play." I've saved many remote controls and lots of clothes that way. Remember, if we tell dogs what not to do they have no way to get out of trouble which also opens the door to potentially negative side effects. It is much more effective to use positive training methods and teach what we want the dog to do (like stopping them before they get on the couch) so we give both dogs and owners a solution. Of course if you have a problem that seems like it's getting worse, I always suggest contacting a professional trainer or behaviorist in your area.



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