

# Positive Training versus being "Dominant" or "Alpha"

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As a professional animal behaviorist and humane dog trainer, I regularly work with fearful, reactive, and anxious dogs. I teach people how to implement behavior modification to successfully resolve their dogs' behavior problems. I am frequently asked how to establish oneself as "alpha" over a dog, or how to teach a client to be the "boss" over her dog. Instead of teaching people to "dominate" their dogs, I teach them how their dogs learn and how to reinforce and reward wanted behaviors.

What is positive training? Positive training means rewarding your dog for performing a behavior you desire. When your dog exhibits a behavior you like, you show your dog that you like that behavior by rewarding your dog. A reward is anything your dog enjoys. Food, running with your dog, throwing a tennis ball, a game of tug, praise, baby-talk, and massaging your dog are examples of rewards. By rewarding your dog for performing a behavior, your dog will repeat that behavior again. By repeating the behavior, your dog will get good at practicing it. Your dog will then exhibit the behavior more often, until the behavior becomes learned and possibly even automatic for him. By understanding how to teach your dog in a positive way, you can redirect unwanted behaviors into wanted ones and manage your dog's environment so that behavior problems do not occur.

## HOW IS POSITIVE TRAINING DIFFERENT FROM BEING "DOMINATE OVER A DOG?"

Techniques used to humanely teach dogs are vastly different from the methods employed by people following a dominance/submission paradigm. When people try to be dominant over dogs, they often use harmful techniques that are confrontational. People try to be "boss" over their dogs by yanking and jerking them. Pinch, choke, and shock collars, as well as yanking on a dog's leash or collar, are all standard methods used by those following an "alpha" approach to training. Choke collars, as their name implies, choke dogs. These collars can greatly damage the trachea and spine, and constrict a dog's air passages. The choke collar does not provide your dog with any guidance or positive instruction. The pinch or prong collar pinches your dog by constricting metal prongs into your dog's neck. It inhibits your dog's behavior through pain and discomfort. This too does not teach your dog how to behave or what to do in a positive way. Shock collars (sometimes called "electronic collars" or "remote trainers") cause pain and instill fear in an animal. The use of these collars, and physically forcing a dog to perform behaviors, damages the relationship between dogs and people, intensifies fear and aggression, makes reactive dogs more reactive and nervous dogs more anxious, and exacerbates behavioral problems.

Dominance and "alpha" style training are based on brawn, not intelligence or compassion. Animals do not learn well under stress. Yanking or jerking a dog's neck or shocking a dog into "submission" will cause a dog to become fearful, shy, or avoidant. These approaches inhibit your dog's behaviors through pain and discomfort, and decrease your dog's ability both to learn and to play. This style of training is fun neither for the dog nor the person, and sets up a confrontation when there was never a need for one.

The methods and tools of a dominance/submissive dog training methodology are punitive. This implies that the dog will not succeed unless there are repeated corrections. The dog is set up for failure from the beginning. Sadly, the dog is punished before the dog knows what to do or what is expected of him. If the dog does not quickly figure out what the trainer or owner wants, the dog is often labeled as stubborn, stupid, or dominant. Rarely do positive, compassionate trainers label dogs or set them up for failure.

"Dominance" is a label. It does not explain how a dog is behaving or what a dog is doing. It does not explain precursors to a behavior, nor does it reveal how a person may be contributing to their dog's behavior and reinforcing it. Few people have any understanding of what dominance or being "alpha" means. Even among researchers the word "dominant" needs to be objectively defined. The meaning of the word will vary depending upon whom you are speaking with or how an individual defines it. Often the word is associated with bullying a dog. Being "dominant" and "alpha" are often words to imply being stronger, bigger, "badder," and tougher. None of these are ways to build trust or cooperation with any animal.

## **DOMINANCE TRAINING IS "NO" TRAINING**

I often get asked by those clients who want to punish their dog's unwanted behaviors, "Why can't I just say "No!?" My answer is simple. The word "No" gives no instructions. The word in itself is meaningless unless it connotes disapproval through voice and mannerisms. Often people are late to intervene, making their "reprimands" useless. If a person comes across adversarial enough, a dog may stop an unwanted behavior temporarily because he is startled, fearful, or afraid, but until the dog is taught a new way of behaving "" in other words, aught another behavior to replace the unwanted one "" the unwanted behavior will continue. It is much more effective and humane to teach your dog what you want from him through positive training, and to prevent and avoid creating behavioral problems, than it is to punish your dog for doing things you dislike.

## **THE BENEFITS OF POSITIVE TRAINING**

Positive training sets your dog up for success by teaching him what you would like him to do so there is no need to punish or to get angry with him. Through positive reinforcement, you will not only teach your dog how to behave in new environments and how to perform behaviors you want, but you'll also enhance the relationship with your dog, boost his confidence, and teach him to trust you. Your dog can happily and easily learn to sit on cue, come to you, look to people for guidance, wait, stay, and leave or drop objects without being made to feel fearful or anxious in the process.

## **FINDING A GOOD TRAINER**

There aren't any universal standards or credentials for dog trainers. Finding a trainer who uses positive methods should be a number one priority. Years of experience are not as important as the methods a trainer uses. Humane trainers will not use choke, pinch, or shock collars, nor will they recommend them. Be wary of breed specific trainers, such as those boasting to train Shepherds, Dobermans, Staffordshire Terriers (a.k.a. pit bulls) and Rottweilers. There is a machismo quality to these breeds, and often these trainers are very heavy-handed.

A skilled positive trainer can teach any breed. Dogs don't defy learning theory. All dogs are amenable to positive training. Good trainers will use food or other rewards, flat collars or harnesses, and will teach you to reward wanted behaviors and to ignore, manage, or redirect unwanted behaviors into desired ones.

## **GOOD ADVICE FOR ALL DOG GUARDIANS**

Be kind to your dogs. Exercise your dogs. Appreciate your dogs and reward them for good behaviors. Do not yell at your dogs or bully them. Set your dogs up for success and manage problems early on instead of creating problems or trying to undo problems you may have created. Animals learn best through kindness and benevolent leadership. Teach your dog positively, and both you and your dog will benefit.

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