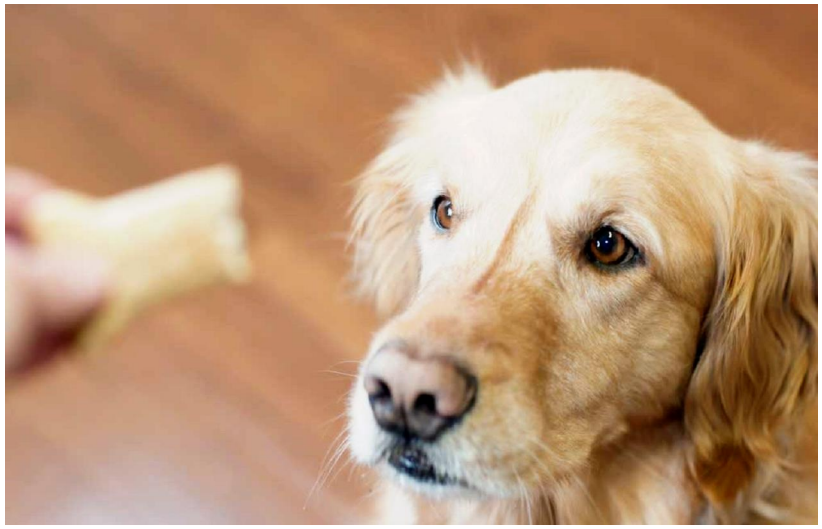
Animal WELLNESS
For a long, healthy life!

Pros Of Positive Dog Training

BY ALANA STEVENSON

Does your dog have behavior problems? Find out why dominance training doesn't work, and why a positive approach is so much better.



You've heard the term "positive training". But what exactly does it mean? Positive trainers are opposed to the dominance/submission approach still used by many trainers. They often work with fearful and reactive dogs, and implement behavior modification to help people humanely and successfully resolve their dogs' behavioral problems.

As a positive trainer myself, I am frequently asked how to establish a "boss" or "alpha" role over a dog. Instead of teaching people to "dominate" their dogs, however, I teach them to understand how dogs learn, and how to reinforce and reward wanted behaviors.

Rewards take priority

Positive training means rewarding your dog for performing a behavior you desire. When your dog exhibits a behavior you like, you show him you appreciate that behavior by rewarding him. A reward is anything your dog enjoys. Food, praise, throwing a ball, playing tug or running, or giving him a massage or a kiss are all examples of rewards. When you reward your dog for performing a behavior, he will want to repeat that behavior. By repeating it, he will get very good at practicing it. He will then exhibit that behavior regularly without you having to reinforce it so often.

The problem with dominance

Positive training is very different from the dominance/ submission approach. When people try to dominate their dogs, they often employ harmful techniques that can be quite confrontational. People often try to be the "boss" by yanking and jerking the dog. Prong, choke, and shock collars, as well as pulling on a dog's leash, are all standard methods used by those following a dominance approach.

• Choke collars, as their name implies, "choke" the animal. They can damage the trachea and spine, and constrict a dog's air passages. The choke collar teaches nothing. It simply punishes.

• The prong collar pinches the dog. It inhibits his behavior through pain and discomfort. This does not teach the dog how to behave or what to do in a positive way.

• Shock collars generate pain and instill fear. If I used an electric current to shock somebody into learning math, it wouldn't be very pleasant or productive, especially for the learner. Likewise, shocking a dog to sit, come or stay is just as inappropriate.

All these training collars are based on pain and punishment. Their use intensifies fear and aggression, makes problem behaviors worse, damages the relationship between dogs and people, and makes anxious dogs more anxious. Animals do not learn well under stress. Yanking or jerking a dog's neck or shocking him into "submission" will make him fearful, shy or avoidant. This style of training is no fun for the dog or the person, and sets up a confrontation when there is no need for one.

The problem with a dominance/submission approach is that all the methods and tools used are corrective or punitive. It implies the dog will not succeed without repeated corrections. It sets him up for failure from the beginning. The dog is punished before he even knows what is expected of him. Because he does not understand what the trainer wants, the dog does not initially perform the desired behavior. He is then labeled as stubborn, stupid or dominant. Rarely do positive, compassionate trainers label dogs or set them up for failure.

Escaping definition

Few people know what dominance or being "alpha" really means. Even among researchers, the word "dominance" needs to be clearly defined. The meaning will vary depending on whom you are speaking to or how he or she defines it. "Dominance" is a label. It does not explain how a dog is behaving, what he is doing, or any of the triggers that may cause him to react. Nor does it explain the precursors to a behavior. It does not reveal how a person may be reinforcing her dog's behavior or how she may have created it. Therefore, "dominance" is not a useful term to help you to understand your dog or his motives.

Saying "no" doesn't help I often get asked, "Why can't I just say 'no'?" My answer is simple. The word "no" gives no instruction. It's meaningless unless it connotes disapproval through voice and mannerism. Often, people are too late to intervene, making their reprimands useless. If a person comes across as adversarial enough, the dog may defer temporarily by inhibiting his behavior. But until he is taught a new way of behaving – in other words, another behavior to replace the unwanted one – the unwanted behavior will continue. It's more effective to teach wanted behaviors early on, and avoid creating behavioral problems, than it is to reprimand your dog for doing things you dislike.

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 he or she uses. Truly experienced positive trainers rarely use the words "alpha" or "dominance". Humane trainers will not use choke, pinch or shock collars. Be wary of breed specific trainers, such as those training German shepherds, dobermans and rottweilers. There is a machismo quality to these breeds, and often the trainers are very heavy-handed.

A positive trainer can teach any breed. Positive training works for all dogs and the teaching and training strategies are universal. Dogs don't defy learning theory. 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 and turn them into desired ones.

Reward your dog for good behaviors. Set him up for success and manage problems early on. Teach your dog humanely, and you'll both benefit. After all, a happy, well-adjusted dog is the best reward of all.