

Response to Cesar Milan and his Methods from a Positive Dog Trainer/Behaviorist

Andrew Luescher, DVM, Veterinary Behaviorist, Animal Behavior Clinic, Purdue University

I reviewed the four preview-videotapes kindly submitted to me by National Geographic. I very much appreciate having gotten the opportunity to see these tapes before the program goes on the air. I will be happy to review any programs that deal with domestic animal behavior and training. I believe this is a responsibility of our profession.

I have been involved in continuing education for dog trainers for over 10 years, first through the "How Dogs Learn" program at the University of Guelph (Ontario Veterinary College) and then through the DOGS! Course at Purdue University. I therefore know very well where dog training stands today, and I must tell you that Milan's techniques are outdated and unacceptable not only to the veterinary community, but also to dog trainers. The first question regarding the above mentioned tapes I have is this: The show repeatedly cautions the viewers not to attempt these techniques at home. What then is the purpose of this show? I think we have to be realistic: people will try these techniques at home, much to the detriment of their pets.

Milan's techniques are almost exclusively based on two techniques: Flooding and positive punishment. In flooding, an animal is exposed to a fear (or aggression) evoking stimulus and prevented from leaving the situation, until it stops reacting. To take a human example: arachnophobia would be treated by locking a person into a closet, releasing hundreds of spiders into that closet, and keeping the door shut until the person stops reacting. The person might be cured by that, but also might be severely disturbed and would have gone through an excessive amount of stress. Flooding has therefore always been considered a risky and cruel method of treatment.

Positive punishment refers to applying an aversive stimulus or correction as a consequence of a behavior. There are many concerns about punishment aside from its unpleasantness. Punishment is entirely inappropriate for most types of aggression and for any behavior that involves anxiety. Punishment can suppress most behavior but does not resolve the underlying problem, i.e., the fear or anxiety. Even in cases where correctly applied punishment might be considered appropriate, many conditions have to be met that most dog owners can't meet: The punishment has to be applied every time the behavior is displayed, within 1/2 second of the behavior, and at the correct intensity.

Most of the theoretical explanations that Milan gives regarding causes of the behavior problems are wrong. Not one of these dogs had any issue with dominance. Not one of these dogs wanted to control their owners. What he was right about was that calmness and consistency are extremely important, but they don't make the presented methods appropriate or justifiable."

The last episode (compulsive disorder) is particularly unsettling because compulsive disorder is related to an imbalance in neurotransmitter levels or receptors, and is therefore unequivocally a medical condition. Would it be appropriate to treat obsessive compulsive disorder in people with punishment? Or have a layperson go around treating such patients?

My colleagues and I and innumerable leaders in the dog training community have worked now for decades to eliminate such cruel, ineffective (in terms of true cure) and inappropriate techniques.