

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.

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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 Millan 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.