What would possess a reasonably intelligent pet owner who loved her dogs and who had a strong background in behaviorism to apply choke-and-drag methods for training her canine companions? This is a question I have asked myself – about myself – many times. Beyond my background in psychology (including classes on animal behavior and motivation!), I held what I thought were relatively humane values, instilled throughout my formative years by my parents’ demonstrations of kind treatment of our family dogs and cats.

I attended my first dog training class, therefore, unaware of any preconceptions or tendencies toward the use of forceful methods. Unfortunately for my dogs, I completely deferred to the trainer’s “expertise” and set aside everything I knew about behavioral psychology and the humane treatment of animals. I trained several successive dogs using the choke-and-drag method I learned in that long-ago class, and although I treated my dogs well in all other respects, I now know that I made them much more anxious than necessary.

Because The APDT Chronicle of the Dog is not a “true confessions” tabloid, you might wonder why I am sharing all this. First, I am not alone. Many APDT members have talked about their “transition dogs,” the ones where they began their crossover journey to force-free training. Second, there are many other people out there—pet owners, rescue workers, veterinarians, hunters, vet techs, and conformance, obedience, agility, and other canine sports enthusiasts—who believe to varying degrees that poking, prodding, pushing, pronging, shocking, and forcing are legitimate methods to teach dogs to behave. It occurred to me that an understanding of my own crossover to positive, behaviorally-based, relationship-oriented dog training might inform my approach to helping others make this transition. I suspect that your own journeys along this path might do the same.

There are probably many reasons people engage in dominance-focused dog training methods. They may have learned those methods from members of their own families, such as their parents, or from the “folklore” that existed about the treatment of dogs when they had their first pet. Maybe they have strong control needs due to circumstances in their own lives. They may have read books or seen television programs that proffered power, control, and dominance as the best means of gaining canine respect. Perhaps they were never exposed to any alternatives. They may have yielded their common sense, as I did, to the “authority” of an expert, whether it was a dog trainer, fellow hunter, pet product vendor, or some other person serving as a canine training mentor. Even scientific understandings change over time, and some current beliefs about dog training may be rooted in earlier stages of our knowledge. (It was not long ago that animal biologists and comparative psychologists risked career-threatening accusations of anthropomorphism if they spoke of animal emotions, but current neuroscience and other research developments have largely changed all that.)

My own development as a positive trainer (as an owner) began long ago with a television program, and it has been a gradual process. The program demonstrated mostly positive methods which opened my eyes to alternatives. As I began to involve my dogs more in my child therapy work, I began reading and watching DVDs featuring APDT notables. This new information made much more sense to me, and I had good results when applying what I learned with my own dogs as well as the pets of my family, friends, and neighbors whom I helped train. My metamorphosis was not complete, however, as I had not yet acquired enough of a foundation to make distinctions between truly force-free methods and those that were hybrids of positive and dominance methods. Knowledge of theory and research were not quite enough to help me judge the applied methods with dogs. Attending seminars about dog training and behavior moved me closer, as did consultations with several positive trainers and animal behavior [continued on next page]
specialists. Conceptually, I was on board with the whole idea, but I’m not sure I was as committed and enthusiastic as I am now. Four things pushed me over the edge, so to speak, to become passionate and dedicated to positive, humane dog training.

First, I consulted several years ago with a dog trainer in my region who had a good reputation for handling the type of behavior problems one of my adopted dogs was exhibiting. I knew little of his specific training approach. In the 90 minutes I spent with the trainer, I observed him deliberately threaten and provoke my dog into aggressive behaviors never seen before or since, and watched with confusion as he used heavy-handed corrections to cover my dog into submission (fear). There was no relationship, no kindness, no positive reinforcement—just pure control as he worked with my dog and one other canine there. His own demo dog trembled constantly in a long down-stay nearby. I ended our involvement in the planned 4-hour session early, paid the full and expensive fee, and considered it money well-spent! It was now crystal clear to me why dominance training was incorrect. My empathy for my dog as I saw the trainer ignore all of her signals of distress coupled with my human psychology instincts that this was more about the trainer’s need for control than about helping me or my dog allowed me to forever leave behind any type of forceful treatment of dogs. I’m sorry I put my dog through that experience, and I thank her regularly for what she sacrificed to help me learn. The ends do not justify the means, especially when there are humane means that lead to the same ends of good canine behavior! Some might argue that this trainer’s approach was particularly harsh and not representative of dominance training, but I’ve now seen many dogs with the same stressful expressions while undergoing milder forms of force-oriented training.

Second, in my canine-assisted play therapy work with children, I knew that the way I treated my dogs communicated a great deal to my human clients, many of whom were foster or adopted children with significant abuse histories. If children saw even mild force being used, it could easily have counter-therapeutic effects and in some cases, even trigger children’s trauma reactions! I had to use positive methods exclusively as I demonstrated dog handling skills and taught them to the children. My knowledge of human psychology in this case motivated me to improve my own positive dog handling abilities so that I could provide a good role-model.

Third, I learned much more about canine communication signals from books, DVDs, workshops and conferences. My awareness increased, my observations confirmed what I had learned, and I understood more what the dogs were saying. My increased sensitivity and receptivity opened my eyes to see each dog more fully as an individual with unique needs and gifts to share. Now I realized what I had known but forgotten along the way—it’s all about the relationship, and healthy relationships are based on trust and reliability and reciprocal consideration of each other’s needs. My world of human psychology now merged with my interest in dog training and behavior.

Fourth, armed with my growing knowledge and awareness, I watched another television program in which the dog trainer used a blend of positive and dominance methods. In one program, the trainer worked with four dogs who signaled their anxiety with aggressive warnings. At the end of the program when the dogs were declared properly calm and under trainer control, all I could see were four extremely clear examples of “whale eye.” The dogs were not calm; they were more fearful than ever, but they had learned to hide their stress signals, perhaps to have more dangerous reactions erupt in the future.

So, why am I a positive dog trainer? My personal reasons for using positive dog training, which are all supported by solid research, follow:

• It is humane.
• Reading dogs’ signals lets me know the dog’s point of view, and I am more likely to do the right thing to set the dog (and me) up for success.
• Dogs learn much more quickly and thoroughly, and they retain what they have learned extremely well.
• It applies knowledge supported by evidence/research, all of which I know to be true from my own training in behavioral and relationship-oriented psychology.
• It is based upon the most up-to-date knowledge about canine learning and behavior and human-animal bonds.
• It promotes the kind of warm, loving relationships I want to have with my friends and clients, human and canine!
• It provides the only acceptable model for the work that I do with children, and even young children learn positive dog training and interactions rapidly.
• It has changed me for the better. I am now more patient and more attuned to what dogs are telling me. I am more successful in helping the owners that I train have fuller, more satisfying, and fun relationships with their dogs. And I live more in the present moment because I sometimes let my dogs train me!

Implications for Dog Trainers

As I reflect on my own dog training journey and its divergence and then convergence with my professional knowledge and skills in psychology, there are several suggestions that I can share with trainers for possible use when working with the public and other canine professionals who may not have found their own crossover path to positive training yet.

Use a gentle educational approach most of the time. If people feel defensive when their beliefs or methods are confronted directly, they quit listening and your message won’t get through. Strident approaches, no matter how strongly you feel about something, often polarize people and can appear unprofessional to those who don’t know the real facts of the matter. For example, strong critical comments

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about a family’s prior dominance-trainer can create what’s called cognitive dissonance, especially when the family liked their prior trainer personally. This is an uncomfortable state of conflicting feelings that people often reduce by taking sides, and very often, their older views will win out. Instead, a more educational approach (but not long lectures!) about how dogs learn and what feelings they are expressing is much more likely to shift views.

Try to be accepting of people’s current place along the path. There are many crossover routes, and careful attention to what people say and feel can give us clues about what methods might work for them. For example, one woman who fostered three dogs in addition to her own two, worried that if she wasn’t harsh, the dogs would take over. She was afraid of losing control and therefore overcompensated. She didn’t like being forceful, but her fear overrode her good intentions. When we focused on how to keep control by applying greater consistency and using more effective positive reinforcement, she willingly abandoned her more negative ways.

Look for the good while correcting the bad. Many people in the play therapy world now identify me with dogs and dog training. They sometimes express their interest and appreciation for media models of dominance dog training that use forceful methods unnecessarily and are founded on faulty assumptions about dog behavior. Like the public, my colleagues react to the trainer’s pleasant personality and the results that are shown at the end of the program. Rather than simply telling them that this trainer or their perceptions are wrong, however, I truthfully mention that I have mixed reactions to the program. I then point out the positive features of the methods depicted while educating about the unneeded use of force and some of the dangers involved in shutting off dogs’ signaling. I then share the force-free alternatives. After these brief education sessions, I show video clips or assign “homework” to watch various media programs and report back what they see as positive and negative features, based on our lesson the week before. In this way, I avoid polarizing the situation while helping them see the dogs’ reactions for themselves – much as what happened for me.

Create or use simple written materials to augment your points. People often give credence to books, pamphlets, and Web site articles, for example. Having short handouts or brochures that explain your points can be very helpful. Simplicity works best. This doubles as a useful marketing tool because these materials can be shared with others. Recommending books – and there are so many great ones available from APDT authors – gives people the alternatives they might not discover on their own.

Speak with confidence and have patience. When explaining your views, do so with a confident tone, but retain your humility. And remember that change takes time for most people. When you share information, you are planting seeds. While some “ahah!” moments might occur, it usually takes longer for people to fully appreciate what you are saying. Giving people a little space honors their journey. Share a point or two and then suggest that they watch their own dogs for examples. This shows trust in people’s ability to learn for themselves, and if you get them to watch their dogs a bit more, the dogs will help those seeds sprout and grow!

Focus on the people and places where you can have an impact, and use “teachable moments.” We probably aren’t going to change everyone. Look for situations and people where you have a reasonable chance of being heard. Write newspaper articles or offer short school or community presentations. Work with children. Watch for brief moments where you can teach one small thing. For example, one teenager with whom I used canine-assisted play therapy continued to grasp my therapy dog around the neck despite my many statements to avoid that. One day while she was squeezing away, I quite telling her what not to do and simply asked her to look at the dog’s face and body and tell me what she saw. Her eyes widened and she said, “Man, she really doesn’t like that much. How come?” Our conversation was on new footing and the teen became much more aware of dog communications and adjusted her behavior thereafter.

As I conclude, I am deeply grateful to many APDT members, authors, and presenters, as well as to the organization itself, for helping me integrate what I knew and wanted with what is best for my closest friends in the animal world. I only hope that I can continue to help others see the immense value of positive dog training, as you have all done for me!

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