



The Playful Pooch Program



A canine-assisted play therapy program of the
Family Enhancement & Play Therapy Center

Risë VanFleet, Ph.D., President

Finding the Right Dog Trainer

Whether you plan to involve your dog in therapy work or not, you care about your companion canine. You want your dog to be happy and healthy and to enjoy being with you as much as you enjoy being with him or her. There are many myths and controversies swirling around the subject of dog training these days, and it can be confusing. Even dog training television personalities have very different theories and approaches, and not all of them are accurate or good no matter how well they are packaged.

I am a proponent of positive dog training. We no longer need unpleasant equipment or invasive or punishing procedures to force our dogs to do as we wish. The so-called dominance and pack-leader theories are based on inaccurate information, even about wolves, and they are no longer considered viable by canine biologists, behaviorists, and researchers. At www.playfulpooch.org, under Resources, there are links to full information on this topic. The truth is, dogs need our benevolent leadership (provided in non-forceful ways), and they also need our love, friendship, caring, and perhaps most of all, our understanding. That understanding needs to come from the dogs themselves! While dogs share some characteristics, they are also unique beings that need to be treated as such!

Did you know that dogs communicate with us all the time? I have lived with dogs my entire life, and I really thought I understood them, but my eyes were opened to the contrary several years ago. Once I began understanding canine communication signals (there are many good resources on this topic), I began to see my dogs in an entirely different light. I began to see what mattered to them, what crushed their spirits, and what made them *want* to be with me and do things with me! As time goes by, I will continue to add book and DVD reviews to my website that highlight some of these key resources. For now, I strongly encourage every dog owner to read the enlightening book by Suzanne Clothier, *Bones Would Rain from the Sky*. It is the best book ever written--and I've read almost all of them--about our human relationships with dogs. It is not a book about dog training per se, but about a way of being with dogs.

Also on my website, www.playfulpooch.org, under Resources, are some articles I've written for various journals or magazines. If you're interested in the things that turned me into a positive dog trainer, read the one entitled *A Psychologist's View of Crossover Training: Personal and Professional Reflections*. Research from a variety of disciplines now points consistently at positive dog training as the way to go. To be humane and ethical, in my view, one must use non-aversive, non-force methods of training. But most of all, as I learned to read my dogs' communication signals, I began to see how

important it was for me to keep things kind, gentle, and positive. And the amazing thing is that these scientifically-based, positive approaches yield quick, long-lasting outcomes without damaging my relationship with my dogs.

For those of you involved in Animal-Assisted Play Therapy, I am developing a new credential for animals and their handlers specifically for working with children and families. This credential asks the handlers to learn as much as the dogs, and I cannot ethically approve credentials for anyone who trains their dogs using force-based methods! Such approaches provide a horrible message to the children with whom we work.

Finding the Right Dog Trainer

So all this brings us to a key question: *How do we find qualified positive trainers to help us help our dogs become well-behaved and happy members of our families, communities, schools, or even our therapy practices?*

There are many details and subtleties involved in dog training. It is a profession with a scientific base, a variety of methods, and differing opinions much like our own. While the best training is derived from operant conditioning methods, and specifically, positive-reinforcement strategies, there is more to it than that. One must learn to consider the dog's point of view, anticipate how situations feel to dogs, and to build secure relationships with them. Furthermore, some canine problems require a different approach, e.g., desensitization and counter-conditioning for fearful behaviors.

It can be very useful to work with a positive dog trainer. This handout provides some basic information about how to find someone who is suitable for working with potential or already-credentialed therapy dogs.

Possible Resources:

In the United States, there is an organization called the Association of Pet Dog Trainers, www.apdt.com. It is devoted to the development and use of positive dog training methods, and most of its members are likewise dedicated to this. They have international members as well. To find an APDT member trainer in your area, go to their website and do a Trainer Search by putting in your zip code or country. It is best to use trainers who have some sort of dog training credential, such as the Certified Pet Dog Trainer (CPDT). There are other certifications as well. ***There is a CAUTION, however - I have found some people listed as trainers on the APDT site who do not seem to be force-free at all. There are trainers now who "say" they are positive when they are not.*** If you find someone at this site or anywhere else, be sure to question them thoroughly (see ideas later in this article), and if you sense any force methods or equipment being used, find someone else.

Another list of positive trainers can be found at www.trulydogfriendly.com. The specific link for finding trainers there is http://www.trulydogfriendly.com/blog/?page_id=4. The International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants also has a list of qualified people to help with behavior or other problems. They must also demonstrate their competence through their level of education, training, experience, and the submission of case studies. Their list is available at www.iaabc.org. Pat Miller has a 2-level certification program for dog trainers, and her list of trainers is at www.peaceablepaws.com. There is a list of Karen Pryor Clicker Training trainers at www.karenpryoracademy.com. *Nothing should take the place, however, of your asking good questions and using your judgment to determine if the person really is positive.*

In the United Kingdom, there is a similar, but separate APDT organization, www.apdt.co.uk. Their screening of members is strict, including essays, exams, oral and practical segments, so you can be

