

An Open Letter to Veterinary and Animal Care Professionals on Referrals to Trainers and Behaviour Consultants

There are numerous professional organisations that offer membership and credentials in the field of animal training and behaviour. Few, however, hold their members to a strict code of conduct which involves the application of their trade through scientific protocols and the objective to cause no harm.

Unfortunately, the pet training industry is entirely unregulated, meaning that anyone can say they are a trainer or behaviour consultant. As a result, those who call themselves dog trainers, or even “dog whisperers,” may still be utilising punitive methods, such as disc throwing, loud correctional “no’s” and, in some cases, more extreme tools such as shock collars, choke chains and prong collars. All of these are, sadly, still at large. They are training tools that, by design, have one purpose: to reduce or stop behaviour through pain and fear. This, as opposed to a constructional approach where operant behaviours are built, and problematic emotional reactions are changed via positive reinforcement and counterconditioning protocols.

Humane, modern animal training relies on science-based protocols: “Within the field of applied behaviour analysis (ABA), there is a 40-year-old standard that promotes the most positive, least intrusive behaviour reduction procedures (also known as the Least Restrictive Behaviour Intervention, LRBI).” (Friedman, 2010). Regardless, there are trainers who elect not to move into this arena, and/or gain informed consent from clients regarding methods and equipment used. They may still be members of professional institutes, associations and councils because many organisations do not hold their members accountable for the training methods they use. Consequently, it is easy to be fooled when searching for a training or behaviour professional.

Methodology

Dog trainers who are still steeped in using punitive training methods are often known to use outdated terms such as “dominance,” “pack leader,” and “alpha dog,” all of which have been proven by canine behaviour scientists and specialists to be inappropriate and inaccurate in their application to pet dogs. In addition, many such trainers use training methods founded in aversive protocols deemed obsolete and damaging – both physically and psychologically (*see American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior position statements under Supporting Documents, below*).

At the Pet Professional Guild educational summit for canine training and behaviour professionals in November 2016, respected veterinarian, board certified animal behaviourist, author, and PPG special counsel, Dr. Karen Overall stated: "Dominance theory has shut off scientific research and has crept into medicine to the point where we think we can do things to animals whereby we are asking them to 'submit'....dominance theory is insidious and has crept into everything we do with dogs and it's wrong. It has gotten in the way of modern science and I've just about had it. Every single thing we do with dogs hurts them because we don't see them as individuals or cognitive partners." (Overall, 2016).

The Fallout of Corrective Training Procedures

Dogs are cognitive, intelligent creatures that experience emotions such as fear, anxiety, and joy. They are subject to the same laws of ABA as any other living organism. Forcing dogs to comply to avoid being shouted at, told “no” in a threatening manner, or having some other discomfort forced on them through

voice control, body language or eye contact does not enhance the canine-human relationship, nor does it create an environment where healthy learning can take place. Rather, a pet repeatedly subjected to aversive stimulation may go into a state of “shut down,” or a global suppression of behaviour. This is frequently mistaken for a “trained” pet, as the pet may remain subdued and offer few or no behaviours. In extreme cases, pets may refuse to perform any behaviour at all, known as “learned helplessness.” In such cases, animals may try to isolate themselves to avoid incurring the aversive stimulation. This is evidently counterproductive to training new, more acceptable behaviours. (O’Heare, 2011).

For punishment to be effective as a means to training a dog, or any other animal for that matter, there are three critical elements that must be met: consistency, timing and intensity. First, the punishment must occur every time the unwanted behaviour occurs. Second, it must be administered within, at most, a second or two of the behaviour. Third, it must be unpleasant enough to stop the behaviour. In the real world, outside science laboratories, meeting these three criteria is virtually impossible for a dog training professional, and most certainly for a dog owner.

According to psychology professor, Dr. Susan Friedman (quoted above), who has pioneered the application of ABA to captive and companion animals: “Punishment doesn’t teach learners what to do instead of the problem behaviour. Punishment doesn’t teach caregivers how to teach alternative behaviours. Punishment is really two aversive events – the onset of a punishing stimulus and the forfeiture of the reinforcer that has maintained the problem behaviour in the past.” (Friedman, 2010). Especially troubling for pet professionals is that punishment requires an increase in the intensity of the aversive stimulus for it to have any hope of maintaining behaviour reduction.

Scientific “Do No Harm” Methods

All animals are motivated by food. Food is necessary for survival. It is therefore a powerful primary reinforcer and a critical component when used correctly as part of a strategic training or management plan. For behaviour consultants who engage in behaviour change programmes where it is necessary to change a pet’s emotional reaction to a problematic stimulus, food is essential. When modifying observable behaviours such as growling, lunging and biting that are often manifestations of a fearful and/or anxious emotional state, the goal must be to change the underlying emotional response, thus enabling the dog to learn a new, more appropriate behaviour. It is frequently misunderstood that fear is an emotion and not a behaviour. You cannot simply “train it out.” Indeed, fear is often the underlying emotional state to aggressive behaviour, and requires the implementation of a different set of scientific protocols and a greater understanding of emotional learning and animal behaviour. A review of the scientific literature recommends the use of food as a reinforcer in desensitisation and counterconditioning protocols that are specifically aimed at addressing the underlying emotions of fear and/or anxiety. In reality, using food to countercondition emotional responses is the most widely accepted method for treating fear-based behaviours (Overall, 2013).

Transparency and Consumer Advocacy

“Positive relationship,” “natural methods,” “relationship building,” “positive only,” and “no food necessary” are all taglines regularly used by dog training organisations in their marketing literature. These expressions appeal to pet owners who may not always understand the various training methods available to them, and the fallout and unintended consequences of making the wrong choice.



The Pet Professional Guild (PPG) is the one US-based, international member association for pet professionals who use force-free training methods only. PPG holds its members to a very high standard in terms of ethics, protocols and transparency. Members are committed to humane, scientific and effective training, care and management protocols. They never use aversive training devices and techniques. The foundation of their work is always to do no harm.

How to Choose a Training or Behaviour Professional

PPG holds that humane educators neither agree with, nor have any need to use correction-based training using devices or aversive stimuli for the care, management or training of pets. Devices and methods that work through eliciting a “startle response,” and/or an alarm reaction to prevent, barking, jumping up, growling or any other problematic behaviour are inhumane and just not necessary.

Ramirez-Moreno and Sejnowski (2012) define the startle response as a “largely unconscious defensive response to sudden or threatening stimuli, such as sudden noise or sharp movement” that is “associated with negative affect.” Lang, Bradley and Cuthbert (1990) state that the startle response (or aversive reflex) is “enhanced during a fear state and is diminished in a pleasant emotional context.” These, and many other canine behaviour experts consider the use of the startle response to be a management or training technique that uses fear as the motivation. The direct consequences of this can include the (intended or unintended) infliction of stress and pain on an animal by an owner or trainer, and, as mentioned above, generalised fear, suppression of behaviour, learned helplessness and/or redirected aggression in the animal him- or herself.

There is perhaps no better way to summarise than the words of Jean Donaldson, founder and principal instructor at The Academy for Dog Trainers, author of best-seller, *The Culture Clash*, and PPG special counsel, who states: “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.” (Donaldson, 2006).

A key question, then, for veterinary professionals who need to refer their clients to a dog trainer or behaviour consultant, is whether they will refer to those who promote methods that include pain and fear as a means of motivation, or those who use more progressive methods that rely on scientifically-supported protocols based on positive reinforcement and seek to do no harm. Before deciding, PPG urges veterinary and animal care professionals to conduct thorough research given that so many fear-based training and behaviour change methods can be very subtle, or even invisible, in the slick, magical way they are marketed to unsuspecting pet owners.

References

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Supporting Documents

American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior Position Statement on Punishment. Available at: http://www.vetmed.ucdavis.edu/vmth/local_resources/pdfs/behavior_pdfs/AVSAB_Punishment_Statements.pdf

American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior Position Statement on the Use of Dominance Theory and Behavior Modification in Animals. Available at: https://www.boulderhumane.org/sites/default/files/dominance%20statement_0.pdf

Pet Professional Guild Position Statement on the Use of Shock in Animal Training. Available at: <http://petprofessionalguild.com/shockcollars>

Pet Professional Guild Position Statement on the Use of Pet Corrective Devices. Available at: <http://petprofessionalguild.com/Equipment-Used-for-the-Management-Training-and-Care-of-Pets>

Pet Professional Guild Position Statement on the Use of Dominance Theory in Pet Training. Available at: <http://petprofessionalguild.com/DominanceTheoryPositionStatement>