

CHOOSING A TRAINER

DOES IT MATTER WHAT THEORIES MY TRAINER USES?

The word training by dictionary definition is “***the action of teaching a person or animal a particular skill or type of behaviour.***”

Yet most of the calls I receive from clients are because they would like help training their dog *NOT* to do things.



How do I stop my dog jumping up?

How do I stop my dog running away on walks?

How do I stop my dog pulling on the lead?

How do I stop my dog stealing things?

How do I stop my dog barking?

This is where dog trainers often split into two camps; the ones that believe your dog is performing the above behaviours to establish dominance or hierarchy, relating to pack leadership theory. Trainers in this camp would start a dominance reduction programme to help you become ‘pack leader’.

Then there are those that are aware that pack structure theories were debunked long ago and that there are many, many reasons why your dog is doing the behaviours listed above. One of which is very possibly a lack of training i.e. teaching the correct behaviour that you want your dog to perform in that situation.

I have been in both these camps. Fourteen years ago, when I began my career in the realm of dog training, pack leader theory was the current thinking based on research by a scientist named David Mech who had spent some time observing captive wolves. When I worked for the Dogs Trust we gave out handouts on how to establish yourself as ‘pack leader’. Since then however new evidence has come to light and the man himself who produced the theory debunked it. You can read about it here and watch a video where he explains that wolves in the wild are family units not packs made up of individuals all with a different rank:

<http://www.davemech.org/news.html>

In case you are interested and would like to do some further research, there are some other articles about pack leader theories at the end of this article.

But what does it matter if you employ a trainer that believes in pack structure or not as long as the problem gets solved?

It matters for four reasons:

1. Trying to cure all behaviour problems with one remedy is dangerous.

I used to go to people's homes and talk them through pack leadership. I would use all manner of aversive equipment from as mild as jerking a dog on a lead to using training discs thrown down near a reactive dog or a spray collar to startle them when they were misbehaving. All this helped (in my misguided belief) the owner to become pack leader. I believed dogs fell into two categories; those that were dominant and trying to rule the 'pack' and those that were frightened and had been given the responsibility of pack leadership when they didn't actually want it. Both were remedied in the same way; by the owner taking control and asserting themselves as Alpha. I recently went to the home of a



lab that was growling at two members of the family. A trainer had been out previously and told them the dog viewed itself in the middle of the pack, below two members of the family and above the other two. They were instructed to alpha roll the dog when it growled to assert their authority. This resulted in one member getting bitten. Long story short the dog had a slipped disc. It was in a LOT of pain. The growl was a warning that the dog was

not comfortable with the approach of the two largest and most energetic members of the family, as experience had taught the dog their affections were painful. Coming at it from a dominance perspective had caused immeasurable damage to the dog's welfare and the relationship between that dog and its family. Trust had completely broken down and the dog was living in a state of fear.

I've seen similar cases of people punishing fearful dogs for their reactivity to things. In fact I see this daily down the local park, a dog is being shouted at and yanked by its owner as it lunges and barks at something passing by, a collie is being admonished for vocally chasing away an over rambunctious Labrador as it approaches at speed. A dominance theory based trainer will give you a magical quick fix solution whereby you punish this undesirable behaviour and it stops. I know because I've done it. It's quick and it's often, at least in the short term, very effective. You end up happy because the embarrassing behaviour has stopped. You think the trainer is wonderful and you feel you've reasserted your position in the pack. Good day all round.

Except maybe for the dog.

Let me explain.

2. **Most displays of aggression are based on an underlying emotion of fear not dominance.**

A show was aired on channel 4 this week with some beautiful examples of a trainer (who has not yet understood that pack theory is not relevant to training dogs) showing the general dog owning public some quick fixes. He used punishment to stop a dog from growling at his owner's new partner. Stopping growling is incredibly



dangerous. A growl is a dog's warning that it is severely stressed and probably about to bite if not taken out of that situation. If you punish the growl and succeed in stopping the dog growling you also succeed in removing the warning and then you have a dog that just bites when they get that stressed again. Maybe you succeed in stopping the dog growling and biting, but you don't change the reason why the dog felt like that in the first place, so now the dog is suppressing the need to bite and that emotion may at some point result in an explosion of that behaviour and a dog that issues a very nasty bite 'out of the blue'.

3. **Punishing the reaction doesn't change the underlying emotion.**

I don't like spiders very much. I have no good reason other than that my mother is also afraid of them. This phobia is very real and has brought me to tears on occasions. Snakes, no problem, rats/mice, absolutely fine, but spiders? Eurgh! Let's say one night I wake up



and there's a spider in the bed. I start screaming which causes my husband a problem because now he can't sleep. He has a few options, perhaps he goes down the punishment route and shouts and me or uses a physical punishment. Perhaps he's successful and I stop screaming. Essentially all that's proved is I'm more scared of the punishment than the spider. The spider is still there, my fear is still there, it's still very real, my expression of it however is suppressed and I now like my husband a lot less.

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This is the equivalent to that trainer punishing the dog for growling at the partner. The dog was terrified of the guy and was trying to create distance between them to help himself feel safe, he was punished for doing so. That would be like me leaving the room or, if I couldn't, I may choose to trap/kill the spider. If my screaming for help always results in physical punishment from my husband I am likely to start taking matters into my own hands and probably killing spiders. Although I may quickly learn to do this silently and without warning.

Let's say my husband uses reassurance, "There, there you're OK, it's just a spider" maybe he even gives me a hug. That's nice, but it still doesn't solve my problem. The spider is still in the bed and in fact I am now not free to leave the bed in a hurry as I am being



contained by a hug. The owner on the program hugged her dog and was told she was reinforcing the fear. You can't reinforce an emotion. Just like a child is not more likely to be frightened next time he wakes up from a nightmare because his mother comforted him last time. The owner was however taking away the dog's escape options by holding onto him.

My husband could get up and remove the spider. That would solve my problem and would also solve his problem. If my husband wants to stop having to rescue me from spiders then I'm going to need some long term treatment to overcome my fear. Most 'quick fixes' that stop the unwanted behaviour of your dog in a couple of sessions will likely involve punishment and will most likely only solve your problem as the owner. Rarely do they solve the dog's problem.

4. **Punishment for 'incorrect' behaviour shows a lack of willing to be up to date with current research on the part of your trainer.**

In this country we used to cane children in school for inappropriate behaviour. Society has realised that this is not the most ethical way of dealing with behaviour that we don't like, to the point that caning a child in school is now illegal. If a teacher were to go on television and use a cane there would be uproar. Claiming ignorance of up to date teaching regulations would be not work to condone that teacher's behaviour. Research has shown that using punishment in dog training in the form of corrections (a yank on the lead, shouting, smacking, squirting water bottles, shaking cans etc.), whilst often having an immediate effect on the undesirable behaviour you are experiencing, simultaneously causes physical harm and emotional distress to the dog and damages the relationship between you. This emotional state is counterproductive to learning. Don't forget training is "***the action of teaching a person or animal a particular skill or type of behaviour.***" Not the ***reaction*** of punishing one, that by definition is not training.



It has been proven time and time again that these corrections are not necessary to 'train' a dog. They're effective sure, but not necessary. The cane was effective, but not necessary. When you have seen a better way to do things, do you not owe it to the dog to use the method that takes their wellbeing into account the most? Even if it takes longer? There are links to research on the effects of punishment at the bottom of this article.



Unlike teaching, the dog training industry is not regulated, there is nothing in place to ensure that the trainer you hire is up to date with their qualifications and using the methods that will most benefit you and look out for your dog's welfare. There are various organisations that trainers can choose to be accredited by, with various codes of conduct and different assessment criteria for qualification. When hiring a trainer always check whether they have chosen, for your sake, to be qualified by an

organisation as this gives you come back if you are not happy and shows that the trainer is looking out for your interests not just trying to make a quick buck. Then check out the organisation and make sure that you agree with their code of ethics. You wouldn't let an unqualified person mess with your electrics or gas so don't let an unqualified person mess with your dog.

A lot of the clients I see wait a long time before calling a trainer but want the problem solved swiftly. The problem may have gone on for a very long time and calling a professional is the last resort before they "consider the alternatives" (rehoming and euthanasia are the two most commonly mentioned). If it took several months or years for a behaviour to get to this point it is unrealistic to expect it to be resolved in a session or two; some problems can be, but not all. Society is used to instant results, that's why we have 'buy now with one click' and 'next day delivery' because we want things now, immediately. Unfortunately to train well and ethically this cannot happen with deep rooted behaviour modification.



So, in summary, the ethics and foundational beliefs of the trainer you hire matter. Their qualifications and experience matter. The trainer on channel 4's programme was basing his training on scientifically incorrect information, proven to do harm to dogs yet he claims to be one of the best in the country. As professionals in our field we owe it to you the client to be as up to date with current research as possible.

Do your research, only use a trainer accredited by an organisation that promises to look after your dog's best interests, not one looking to make lots of magical quick fixes and be heralded as a hero. You can find a list of training regulatory organisations by visiting the animal behavior and training council <http://www.abtcouncil.org.uk/>

Never be afraid to tell a trainer if you are not comfortable with something they want you to do to your dog. You are your dog's voice and their protector. If you don't understand why the trainer is doing something, don't be afraid to ask. If your trainer is talking to you about pack theory, then you can be assured that they have not done much career development to ensure that they are giving you the best and most up to date advice. They are at least 10 years out of date.

Further reading about pack leader theory:

<https://apdt.com/pet-owners/choosing-a-trainer/dominance/>

<https://positively.com/dog-training/myths-truths/pack-theory-debunked/>

<http://www.apbc.org.uk/articles/why-wont-dominance-die>

There's also a good book called 'Dominance, Fact or Fiction' by Barry Eaton. It's a small book, well worth a read.

Further reading on punitive methods and changing unwanted behaviour:

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/canine-corner/201403/dog-aggression-is-predicted-training-methods-and-breed>

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/canine-corner/201205/is-punishment-effective-way-change-the-behavior-dogs>

<http://www.dogwelfarecampaign.org/implications-of-punishment.php>