

Is a Good Dog Trainer Hard to Find?

By Chris Shaughness

I've recently been hearing stories from my clients and DVGRR adopters about dog trainers who still use methods involving fear and punishment to get a dog to behave or listen. I get so sad when I hear this because the reason most of us get a dog is for the love and companionship they provide to us. This relationship can be very rewarding, especially when characterized by mutual trust, respect, and understanding. The *last* thing we should want is for our dogs to fear us. Trainers who use fear-based methods may get "results" some of the time, but such results come at a serious cost to the dog/owner relationship and could cause more harm than good to the dog, depending on the dog's personality. As a professional pet behavior counselor, that's when I get the calls.

I have heard trainers advising owners to roll dogs on their backs and hold them there to show the dog that the owner is in charge. (Sometimes known as an alpha roll, this technique was "in vogue" some years ago, but has since fallen into disfavor with positively oriented trainers.) I hear "The trainer told me to roll Donner on his back to show him that I am the boss. Donner growled and tried to bite me!" Of course he did! A dog with a naturally dominant nature will not put up with this type of treatment. What the trainer should have told this person is that establishing yourself as the dog's leader is best achieved through positive methods, such as deference (more on this method in future articles).

Some trainers still use pinch collars to correct a dog who will not comply. However, a shy and submissive dog will become even more fearful with this treatment. In addition, some trainers tell owners to "scruff" a dog—that is, grab the dog by the loose skin behind the neck when the dog is unruly, to calm him down. These trainers are not aware that scruffing done by a human only agitates an already adrenaline-charged dog. The same thing goes for holding a dog by his jowls to get him to calm down. Be an informed consumer when choosing a trainer because this person will have significant influence on your dog's behavior and the future happiness of your family. Learning obedience skills through a knowledgeable and up-to-date professional trainer is an excellent way to improve communication with your dog, increase the bond with your best pal, and just have fun!

Finding a Reputable Trainer

You can find dog trainers via word of mouth, from brochures or flyers posted at vet offices and pet supply stores, on the Internet (go to www.apdt.com), and in the phone book. But as noted above, training won't do you or your dog any good unless it's provided by someone with appropriate qualifications. Once you've identified a few potential trainers, I *strongly* recommend that you sit in on one of their actual classes before signing up. Some things—like the trainer's teaching skills and their actual interaction with the dogs—are best assessed by observation. Yes, it can be time consuming, but it's definitely worth it in the long run to make sure you and your dog have a good experience.

When selecting a dog trainer, ask some questions:

- Do you believe that choke chains and pinch collars should be used, or are there alternatives? Ask if they are familiar with the Gentle Leader, Sensation harness, or Easy Walk harness—all good tools for teaching control without manhandling your dog.
- How do you recommend getting a dog to respect humans as leaders? If the trainer talks about deference, otherwise known as “making your dog work for everything,” then you have a trainer who is up-to-date on how to train a dog.
- How do you use positive reinforcement in your training? Here again, if the trainer uses only positive methods, then you have found someone who believes that inducing fear is not the way to train a dog.
- Do you use anything besides food as a motivator? If the trainer will work with toys, affection, and/or praise as alternatives to food, you have found a trainer who is innovative and probably in touch with how a dog thinks.
- Ask how much and what kind(s) of experience the trainers have had and how they keep up to date (attending seminars, workshops, etc.).

If you attend a class and find that you do not like the methods of the trainer, do not be afraid to ask for your money back—and tell them why. With enough negative feedback, hopefully trainers still using harsh or fear-based methods will realize they need to update their skills.

Spread the word that positive works and enjoy the benefits reaped by your dog!