

New Study Finds Popular “Alpha Dog” Training Techniques Can Cause More Harm than Good

by Sophia Yin, DVM
March 9, 2009

“The client, an elderly couple, had a 6-year-old male, neutered Rhodesian Ridgeback that was aggressive to dogs” describes Dr. Jennie Jamtgaard, an applied animal behavior consultant and behavior instructor at Colorado State University College of Veterinary Medicine. “They had watched Dog Whisperer with Cesar Millan and seen Millan place aggressive dogs in with his group of dogs and then hold them down on their sides or back if they were aggressive. So they brought their dog to the dog park and basically flooded him [immersed him in the aggression-inducing situation].”

Not surprisingly, they didn’t get far. “The female owner was trying to make the dog lie down while she stood on the leash, while all the dogs came up to hover and sniff. Her dog growled, then another dog growled back, and her dog (who probably weighed the same as she did) started to lunge and she couldn’t stop it. Then she was bitten while breaking up the fight that ensued. She could not have done an alpha roll if she had wanted to, though she did lament her obvious lack of being in the ‘pack leader’ role.”

In this case, the bite was an accident. But it’s not always so.

Jamtgaard describes another case, an Australian Cattledog mix with severe aggression (lunging, growling, barking) directed at other dogs whenever they came into view, even hundreds of feet away:

“The dog was fine with people and had never been aggressive to people before this bite. The owners were Millan-watchers, and dealt with the dog in a completely punishment-based way. They thought this was what they were supposed to do, but felt uncomfortable and frustrated. They repeatedly tried to physically subdue the dog whenever it was aggressive, a technique they had done for months. They admitted to knowing things weren’t improving but didn’t have other ideas. Finally, at PetSmart, the dog growled and lunged, and when the female owner—5 months pregnant at the time—tried to force the dog down, she was bitten on the arm. The bite was tooth depth punctures. That was when they called me.”

Bite Incidences Come as No Surprise

Unfortunately, these bite incidences are not surprising. According to a new veterinary study published in *The Journal of Applied Animal Behavior* (2009), if you’re aggressive to your dog, your dog will be aggressive, too.

Says Meghan Herron, DVM, lead author of the study, “Nationwide, the number-one reason why dog owners take their dog to a veterinary behaviorist is to manage aggressive behavior. Our study demonstrated that many confrontational training methods, whether staring down dogs, striking them, or intimidating them with physical manipulation, do little to correct improper behavior and can elicit aggressive responses.”

Indeed, the use of such confrontational training techniques can provoke fear in the dog and lead to defensively aggressive behavior toward the person administering the aversive action.

For the study, Herron, Frances S. Shofer and Ilana R. Reisner, veterinarians with the Department of Clinical Studies at University of Pennsylvania, School of Veterinary Medicine, produced a 30-item survey for dog owners who made behavioral service appointments at Penn Vet. In the questionnaire, dog owners were asked how they had previously treated aggressive behavior, whether there was a positive, negative or neutral effect on the dogs’ behavior, and whether aggressive responses resulted from the method they used. Owners were also asked where they learned of the training technique they employed. 140 surveys were completed.

Some Techniques Triggered Aggression

The highest frequency of aggression occurred in response to aversive (or punishing) interventions, even when the intervention was indirect:

- Hitting or kicking the dog (41% of owners reported aggression)
- Growling at the dog (41%)
- Forcing the dog to release an item from its mouth (38%)
- “Alpha roll” (forcing the dog onto its back and holding it down) (31%)
- “Dominance down” (forcing the dog onto its side) (29%)
- Grabbing the jowls or scruff (26%)
- Staring the dog down (staring at the dog until it looks away) (30%)
- Spraying the dog with water pistol or spray bottle (20%)
- Yelling “no” (15%)
- Forced exposure (forcibly exposing the dog to a stimulus – such as tile floors, noise or people – that frightens the dog) (12%)

In contrast, non-aversive methods resulted in much lower frequency of aggressive responses:

- Training the dog to sit for everything it wants (only 2% of owners reported aggression)
- Rewarding the dog for eye contact (2%)
- Food exchange for an item in its mouth instead of forcing the item out (6%)
- Rewarding the dog for “watch me” (0%)

Who Uses Punishment-Based Techniques?

“This study highlights the risk of dominance-based training, which has been made popular by television programs, books, and other punishment-based training advocates,” says Herron.

For instance, Dog Whisperer with Cesar Millan – the popular National Geographic Channel television series – routinely demonstrates alpha rolls, dominance downs and forced exposure, and has depicted Millan restraining dogs or performing physical corrections in order to take valued possessions away from them.

And like their previous bestselling books, *Divine Canine* by the Monks of New Skete focuses on correcting bad behaviors using choke chain and pinch collar corrections rather than proven non-aversive techniques.

These sources attribute undesirable or aggressive behavior in dogs to the dogs striving to gain social dominance or to a lack of dominance displayed by the owner. Advocates of this theory therefore suggest owners establish an “alpha” or pack leader role.

But veterinary behaviorists, Ph.D. behaviorists and the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior (AVSAB) – through its position statement on *The Use of Dominance Theory in Animal Behavior Modification* – attribute undesirable behaviors to inadvertent rewarding of undesirable behaviors and lack of consistent rewarding of desirable behaviors.

Herron stresses, “Studies on canine aggression in the last decade have shown that canine aggression and other behavior problems are not a result of dominant behavior or the lack of the owner’s ‘alpha’ status, but rather a result of fear (self-defense) or underlying anxiety problems. Aversive techniques can elicit an aggressive response in dogs because they can increase the fear and arousal in the dog, especially in those that are already defensive.”

Owners Often Fail to See the Connection

Herron points out that, interestingly, not all owners reporting an aggressive response to a particular aversive technique felt that the training method had a negative effect on their dog’s behavior. For instance, while 43% of owners who hit or kicked their dog reported aggression directed toward them as a result, only 35% of owners felt that the technique had a negative effect.

Herron explains that one reason owners may have difficulty making the connection is that aversive techniques may temporarily inhibit reactive or undesirable behaviors – so that it appears the behavior has improved – but it’s not a long-term fix. In addition, owners may not have recognized non-aggressive fearful responses to the correction and may have felt the technique was indeed helpful in the particular context. However, increasing the dog’s fear can also increase defensive aggression in the same or other situations.

What Methods Can Be Used Instead?

These results highlight the importance of using positive reinforcement and other non-aversive methods when working with dogs, especially dogs with a history of aggression. Indeed, such non-aversive methods, which focus on rewarding desirable behaviors and changing the dog's emotional state, work well for aggressive dogs.

So what about the Australian Cattledog and Rhodesian Ridgeback we met at the beginning of this post?

Says Jamtgaard about her cases, “The Australian Cattledog improved dramatically at our consultation, being calm during situations the owners had never witnessed before, such as the neighbor dogs barking at her only a few feet away. I think seeing what just a few minutes of work could accomplish by changing approach gave them the hope that it could work.

Within four to six weeks they began to be able to go on normal walks with her, with dogs at normal distances. I continued following up by phone with the owners every few days at first, then weekly for the first three months. They felt so good that they could treat her differently (more kindly). The owner now competes with her dog in weight-pulling contests and can be in close contact with other dogs they meet during contests and on the street, whereas before, the dog was reactive from over a hundred feet.”

This calm behavior has continued well beyond the first months of training. Jamtgaard states, “I saw the owner two years after the consult, with toddler in tow, and things were continuing to go well.”

“The elderly couple with the Rhodesian Ridgeback also achieved their goals in that six to eight week range, structured similarly to the above as far as consults,” says Jamtgaard. They were able to walk their dog safely and have him remain calm when they encounter other dogs. The dog can sit while they talk to the other dog owners. They do walk him on a Gentle Leader, but that helps with the safety issue of his size relative to their weight, should a situation happen. At last communication, approximately six months after our initial consult, things had continued to go well.”