

Did Cesar Millan Have to Hang the Husky?

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Stringing up a dog by a noose to discipline them is animal abuse.

Because of what I do, I'm always getting emails about the latest information on animal cognition and animal emotions and also on animal abuse. I usually receive reports or videos of abuse in research laboratories, zoos, circuses, and rodeos or on factory farms but from time to time people ask me questions about dog training. Last year I received a video showing Cesar Millan (aka the "dog whisperer") hanging a husky who was ill-behaved. This treatment of a sentient being named Shadow sickened me and I soon discovered that many others also were horrified by this so-called "training" session. (For further discussion please see Mark Derr's *Pack of Lies*.)

When I speak with dog trainers I mention this video and by and large most people agree that putting a noose around a dog's neck and yanking them off the ground and suspending them in air is unnecessarily cruel and abusive and that they would be really upset if this were done to their dog. So too would I. However, recently I was told by a few people that it was just fine to string up a dog who needed to be disciplined. I then asked them if they would do this to a child or another human being and they emphatically said "No, of course not." Well, then, why allow it to be done to a dog? It's also useful to ask if they would let someone do it to them before they did it or allowed it to be done to their or another dog? If not, why not?

This is what a dog expert wrote to me about the stringing up of Shadow. "First, it looks to me like, Millan provokes and prolongs the attacks in order to string the dog up in such a way that he puts pressure on the carotid artery. Second, when he pins it with his hand, he definitely seems to put pressure on the carotid artery as well. If these observations are true, it's no wonder the dog is subdued. Makes me wonder whether that knuckle pinch also is aimed at the carotid?" If you have the courage to watch the video, you'll see that Shadow wasn't "merely" lifted off the ground.

Indeed, Shadow was put in his place and this degree of trauma likely will have a long term effect as does any other abuse to which an individual is exposed, intentional (as in this case) or unintentional. We know that dogs and other animals suffer from long-term depression and PTSD after being traumatized and training techniques that cause trauma shouldn't be sanctioned and should be strongly opposed.

I'm writing about Shadow because there simply has to be limits as to what is permissible when trying to get dogs to behave in acceptable ways. Stringing up dogs or other animals goes well beyond what I would accept and if I saw someone doing this, I'd call the police immediately. I imagine most people would do the same. If one thinks a dog deserves this sort of treatment then it would be useful to know why this is so and discuss how non-abusive techniques can be used instead of those that harm and intimidate. Many people who work with domestic and wild animals are using and continually developing training techniques based on positive reinforcement (see also) and so too should everyone who works with our best friends. Training must factor in the capacity for an individual to suffer and experience deep and enduring pain.

As Mark Derr notes, “Properly treating aggression, phobias, anxiety and fears from the start can literally save time and money. Mr. Millan’s quick fix might make for good television and might even produce lasting results in some cases. But it flies in the face of what professional animal behaviorists — either trained and certified veterinarians or ethologists — have learned about normal and abnormal behavior in dogs.”

Quick-fix training techniques based on severe intimidation and various forms of psychological and physical abuse need to be removed from training protocols and our objections to these methods need to be louder than mere whispers behind closed doors. Shadow’s saga, his very sad story, forces us to think about who we are, who they (other animals) are, and how we must treat them.

Dogs expect us to treat them with dignity and respect, and when they become challenging and try our patience, we must never ever forget that they are sentient beings who thoroughly depend on our goodwill. It’s a dirty double-cross to intentionally abuse them and commit them to a life of fear. It’s a betrayal of their trust that we will always have their best interests in mind. It also demeans us.

The hearts of our companion animals, like our own hearts, are fragile, so we must be gentle with them. Let’s openly and graciously thank them for who they are, for their unfiltered love, and embrace their lessons in passion, compassion, empathy, devotion, respect, spirituality, and love. Surely, we will never have any regrets by doing so, and much pure joy will come our way as we clear the path for deep and rich reciprocal relationships based on immutable trust with our companions and all other beings. Elliot Katz, founder of In Defense of Animals, suggests we drop the word “training” and start using the word “teaching.” Training often becomes synonymous with “breaking.” Training should not mean breaking their fragile hearts.