

Secret to Dog Training by the Terrier Man

PSSST! I'm whispering. That's because I am a dog whisperer. I know secret things that others may not be willing to tell you.

Are you sitting down? Good. Now brace yourself, because I am going to (pardon the expression) let the cat out of the bag. Here it is: there are a LOT of ways to train a dog, and almost all of them work. Yes, that's right: William Koehler's methods work, and so too do Ian Dunbar's. Cesar Millan's methods work, and so do Karen Pryor's. Victoria Stillwell's methods work, and so do Tamar Geller's, Jan Fennell's, Patricia McConnell's, and Barbara Woodhouse's. All of these people have made careers out of successfully training dogs.

Anyone who tells you different is a liar.

Yes, that's right. The people who slag Cesar Milan are liars. So too are those who sneer at Karen Pryor. It all works.

You want another secret? Fine. Here it is: Like everything else in the world, dog training is subject to fads, philosophy and branding. Everyone is trying to sell you something (if only their own expertise), and part of sales is to convince you that they have something better, and the other guy has something worse. Sometimes it's true. Mostly, it's bunk. You want more? Fine. Here's a little about dogs -- the tabula rasa we are working with.

Dogs, like humans, are pack predators and scavengers that operate within a loose social hierarchy. Like humans, they have their own language, and like humans they learn best when instruction is clear and consistent and when it comes after a "recess" period involving physical exercise.

Like humans, dogs operate for rewards, but they also shy away from adverse consequences. Like humans learning the alphabet, dogs can learn to string small bits of knowledge together to form entire sentences of instruction, but first they have to learn the vowels and consonants.

There. That's the basics.

You want more? Fine, here it is: While there are a lot of ways to make a puppy or young dog learn the basics of walking, sitting, coming, etc., most out-of-control adult dogs are a mess for the same three reasons:

Not enough ACTIVE one-on-one time with the owner (including real exercise and long walks);
No consistency, and;
A confusion, by the owner, that the dog is a child.
That's it.

Watch any dog trainer, and you will see I am right.

What most dog training professionals bring to the table is simply a routine: If you spend 10 minutes, twice a day exercising a dog, and another 10 minutes, twice a day, training a dog with ANY training system you find on a shelf, your dog will probably end up brilliant within a few months.

Of course, that will only happen if the owner/trainer is consistent. This is the second thing the trainer brings to the table. Most people and most families are wildly inconsistent and, as a consequence, are poor communicators. Professional trainers teach owners to be consistent in their messaging.

Of course, it is the third point where a great deal of the controversy lies. A lot of dog people are terribly confused about dogs. They think a dog is a child, and they think children should only have positive rewards. In their mind, no child and no dog should ever get a correction. It is, of course, complete nonsense.

Here's a hint about dogs; dogs are the actual experts. And guess what? Dogs do not click and treat. Dogs communicate through body movement, voice, and yes TEETH.

What? Dogs use "coercion" with each other? Yes, sometimes. A couple of times a day in my little pack.

And, of course, dogs have pecking orders every bit as developed as that of chickens.

And YES, dogs are looking for a leader. This last point is one of the secrets every successful dog trainer brings to the table.

Most dogs crave leadership every bit as much as they crave food, love, and time in the sun.

Most dogs have the capacity to be submissive to a true leader. Puppies are submissive to older dogs, and smaller dogs are submissive to larger dogs.

Submission is not fear -- it is followship, the analog to the leadership you should be providing.

Of course this notion of "leadership" runs riot in a lot of people's heads.

In the modern world, too many people eschew leadership. They want everyone to be equals, and they want every little thing to be talked

out and negotiated, especially within the family.
What does that mean for children?

It means if you tell your teenager they need to be home by 10 pm, but move the hour to 11 pm after a half hour of argument, you are teaching your child that arguing works -- and you are sure to get a lot more of it!

The same goes for dogs. Consider this: your refrigerator door is probably a better dog trainer than you are.

Why do I say this?

Simple: For your dog, the refrigerator door should be the most important door in your house. Behind it lies every type of food your dog has ever dreamed of.

And yet, your dog never barks at the refrigerator door. Why not? Simple: because your dog knows that door will never open no matter how long it is barked at. When your refrigerator says NO, it means NO.

In some people's minds, this kind of absolutism smacks of "authoritarianism." They think there should be some give and take with the dog. "Just Look at Tricky-Woo. He looks so hungry!"

Here we come to the root of so many problems: Vacillating people who are unable to send consistent signals on the front end, and who are unable to deliver consistent consequences on the back end.

Let's think about the kids again.

Your teenager borrows the car and does not come home at 11 pm, as agreed, but sneaks in the back door at 3 am.

Best to ignore it, right? If you do, see if you do not get more of it!

And so it is with dogs.

Slip a simple chain slip collar on a dog, and give a decent jerk every time the dog pulls at the end of the lead, and your dog will straighten up and be walking at your side in no time.

Reward it with a small piece of hot dog, or a scratch on the head when it walks slightly behind you on a loose lead, and he will get the message even faster.

Yet, there are people adamantly opposed to simple slip-chain collars, just as there are people adamantly opposed to levying negative consequences on their own children for bad behavior.

Who are these people? They fall into several camps.

Some are armchair philosophers who have no experience working with difficult dogs. Because they have trained a few retriever puppies they are sure they know the score for all dogs all the time, and never mind that they have no clue as to how to handle an adult dog-aggressive Pit Bull, a deer-chasing Lurcher, or a sheep-worrying Collie.

Another group are folks who are emotionally incapable of being true leaders. These people will tell you they "love" their dogs so much they could never be so "cruel" as to jerk on a chain slip-collar, no matter that the dog quickly stops pulling and is not in pain from the correction.

Does that mean these people can never train their own dogs? No.

The good news, is that almost ANY dog training regime will work if it is done consistently (even pure click-and-treat training) provided it is done consistently, and the dog is young or has no other serious behavior problems.

Will a "pure positive" training regime be a bit slower than if the owner had used a more balanced training system with a chain collar? Probably.

Will the dog be as "bomb proof" as it might be if a more balanced training method had been used? Probably not.

Will a pure positive training system fix a sheep-worrying terrier? Nope.

But will it probably work for you and your young dog? Sure.

As noted at the beginning, almost any published dog training method will work provided it is done consistently, every day, by a calm owner who clearly communicates with his or her charges after a decent period of exercise.

This is the real "secret" to dog training, and it's really no secret at all.

by the Terrier Man

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