

HOME

FEATURES

COLUMNISTS

## the dog trainer

Exploring the Canine language.



### Don't be a Bully to your Dog

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Sun Columnist

Being somewhat new to the island, and a dog trainer as well, I have sought out obedience training classes to observe. I have always enjoyed watching trainers practice their craft, even though I finished my own novice training many years ago.

I wasn't prepared however, for what I witnessed the other night. I had watched one particular group's novice class before, and I found the jerking and pulling of the dogs excessive. I use more motivational and positive reinforcement techniques.

This night, though, I observed the advanced novice class and in general it was very upsetting to watch. An instructor was issuing harsh commands to the humans. Dogs were pulled, yanked and flung around until they obeyed. Many of these dogs were very small and looked very scared. Who could blame them? This "method" was downright cruel, and the only reason the dogs obeyed was so they wouldn't get hurt! I had had about enough and was going to leave when I suddenly heard the same instructor yell out to someone, "whack your dog," and out of the corner of my eye, I saw a man pull out a device from behind his back and hit his dog who was sitting next to him. I was flabbergasted. What just happened? I was trying to figure out what prompted this when the class started doing a figure eight exercise and again the instructor yells out, "whack your dog." I jumped out of my chair this time, but surprisingly no one else did. To no one in general, I cried out, "Did you see that? He hit his dog; it's not OK to hit your dog!"

The class wasn't finished so I went up to the assistant instructor and asked if "whacking" a dog was always incorporated into their training. The woman replied, "This dog has been in the class twice and he lunges at people." So that was their solution to the problem: hit the dog if he wasn't obeying, even if he was just sitting!

I would like to make clear that it is never OK to hit your dog, especially with an object! This type of "training" promotes a bully mentality: intimidate your dog through fear and punishment. Today's contemporary trainers have abolished this outdated, barbaric method. If this dog was showing aggression, I sure didn't see it. I was heartbroken to see the dog flinch the second time he was struck, and what exactly was he teaching the dog? The humane issues aside, ask any competent trainer about hitting an aggressive dog and they will tell you that you are creating more aggression. Most of aggression is fear based, and if you instill enough fear and pain in a dog, you run the risk they will turn on you or someone else. I wouldn't be at all surprised if this dog bites someone. The hand that feeds him, now hurts him. The dog will most likely give no warning either; why should he?

I contacted the former President of the club and she suggested meeting me at the class the following week. She introduced me to the offending instructor, who happened to be the Vice President of the club. I was officially feeling outnumbered. The instructor told me they were using the "Koehler" method. This training method is well known for its harshness and roughness. She then added this method was "approved." I wondered silently by whom. She said alternative training methods were tried and they did not help the dog's aggression. She then informed me that sometimes you just have to "knock it out of them." The caveman mentality of that statement sent shivers down my spine. I told her I disagreed but there wasn't much to say after that. Hindsight has always brought about my best thinking, and I wondered how much alternative effort was actually put into this dog. Anyone who watches Cesar Milan knows that he has never hit a dog, and he has worked with some very serious cases.

The best path is to work with your dog from day one before behavioral problems develop. I cannot stress how important it is to socialize your dog. If you are already beyond this phase, seek out a private trainer to help you. If your dog has aggression issues, look for someone with a lot of experience in aggression. Make sure you ask a lot of questions, and if they want to include hitting your dog, run the other way. I have referred certain clients in Los Angeles to trainers who specialized in aggression.

Build a loving, trusting bond with your dog and incorporate him into the family. Pay attention to your dog's likes and dislikes. Be sure to spay or neuter, train your dog, exercise and play with your dog! All of these acts will help establish a strong bond and a well-balanced dog. Take the time for these preventative measures so you won't have an unbalanced dog. If you start to see behavioral problems, don't ignore the problem and just hope it will go away. Take affirmatives action and get help. It is our responsibility to love and guide our canine companions. Pain and punishment are not part of the equation. Don't be a bully to your dog. It's simply not OK.

Dog trainer and former dog nanny for Ozzie Osbourne, Abby Elliott is offering her canine expertise in Honolulu. For more information, contact Abby at (808) 291-2111.