

Alpha is *Not* a Four-Letter Word

Equating alpha with abuse is a mistake.

By Carol Lea Benjamin

As a pack animal, bred and born for cooperative living, the dog, not Ronald Reagan, is the great communicator. It is part of the very nature of a dog to be able to assess a group of any species to determine strong from weak, alpha from omega, and, clever thing, to place himself accurately in the hierarchy. He does this by using and reading body language, the subtle signs and signals of natural authority or the lack of it. That's communication! Dogs don't take ground with tanks and guns. They're too smart, too practical.

What happens when the dog finds out someone other than himself merits leadership? Were he human, he might become small and bitter, full of thoughts of revenge. But he's not human. Isn't that partly why we are so attached to his species? He feels no resentment at all. Instead, and here's the kicker, he worships the one he recognizes as worthy of leadership --the alpha. There is nothing more attractive to a dog than his alpha. Did your dog ever instantly offer the crown to a stranger? In a living room full of company, who did he choose to look lovingly at, to lean on? Or, if not so well-schooled, did he climb aboard the "dominant" person's lap and clean his glasses? There's a kind of mental strength and greatness of spirit that any dog can recognize and respond to. It is what makes him feel safe and happy. It is the right of every dog to know who's in charge.

Attitude Adjustment

Alpha is an attitude, confidence brought on by understanding dogs and loving them as well. It has nothing to do with cruelty. Yet of late, there is a great sweep of sentiment toward training methods which virtually eliminate the concept of alpha, equating alpha with dominance and dominance with abuse. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Saying that you train with positive reinforcement or just with love and praise *sounds* really good. It sounds kind. Surely, we dog lovers all want to sound kind. And no one who trains dogs would deny the importance of positive reinforcement. But a dog, because he is a dog, needs to know the other side of the coin. When adolescence rears its ugly head, *positive reinforcement-only* techniques tend to fall quickly apart.

Ironically, many trainers say they only use food for "difficult to motivate" dogs, or worse, "difficult dogs," ensuring that they remain so. The obsession to "stay positive" gets as silly as the advice in one book that suggests you rid your dog of obnoxious behavior by naming the behavior and never requesting it. As Joan Rivers would say, "Grow up!"

Instant Gratification

Training with treats offers instant gratification. You can get a puppy to sit and down and stand and follow in no time flat by luring him with bits of food and by shaping and naming the postures and behaviors you desire. But as quick as the training appears to be is also how superficial it is. When something more tempting arises, the dog will not obey. This is particularly so for the adolescent dog when simply the freedom to disobey is in itself an irresistible temptation. In fact, choosing to disobey is a normal stage of development, the canine version of the terrible twos.

At this point, the trainer's response should be something like your parents' was when you were an obnoxious teen: "Because I said so." If you are alpha, you do this with a warning sound, a well-directed look or, if necessary, a leash correction. Dog abuse? No, dog training, training based on the concept that the dog is a pack animal and that every pack needs a leader.

There is another important issue here. When training a dog in a more traditional way--the way his mother taught him--you keep his focus on the relationship. This leads to a most satisfying friendship with a dog. Lure or food training developed with animals that could not be trained by traditional dog-training methods because they were not pack animals or they lived in water rather than on land. You cannot train a chicken to dance using a collar and leash or the force of your personality. When chickens or dolphins are trained to perform it is that performance that is important, not the relationship. In circumstances where this is also true with dogs, lure training is an appropriate choice. In other words, if getting a flashy, accurate, high-scoring performance in the obedience ring is what's most important to you, and if your time is limited, lure training may be your best bet. With it, you can get a good performance. You are unlikely, however, to get a well-trained dog.

Trainers complain that pet owners will not spend the time it takes to train a dog well with natural (i.e., alpha) methods of training. No doubt about it, training a dog takes time. But in the long run, short cuts take more time because they don't really work. So many of the clients I see are paying the price for having used instantly gratifying puppy training. They are finding that when their dogs begin to think the dark thoughts of adolescence--"Hey, this is America, just because you call doesn't mean I have to come"--they do not have an appropriate relationship or language to fall back on. These dogs, dogs who live as family members, need the natural family structure they are born to understand. To rob them of this is perhaps in itself a form of dog abuse.

The Old-Fashioned Way

Having never done anything cruel or unfair to a dog in my life, I get fed up reading articles that claim that training by any other method other than a lure method is rough or cruel. The fact is that over the years I have observed a lot of other trainers working. I have also seen lots of dogs working and failing to work. As far as I can observe, it's only the real stuff, old fashioned dog training if

you will, that goes deep, teaching a dog so well that he understands exactly what you want and is more than happy to give it to you because a) you are his leader and he worships you: and b) he knows you can make him do it in the same comprehensible way his mother would have should he decide it's his constitutional right to disobey.

When I go out and about with my dogs in the real world, their safety is in my hands. I have to know that when I call, my dogs will not find another dog, a flock of pigeons or something blowing in the wind more attractive than me. The only way to proof a dog for a real life is by being alpha. To me, that has always meant being the kindest, smartest, most fun leader you can possibly be. How on earth did alpha become a four letter word, folks? It makes no sense to me.

On Another Note

If my mother were here, she'd remind me now to say thank you. You spoke. The *GAZETTE* listened. I am grateful. This is grand friends, simply grand.

Ms. Benjamin is a professional trainer and author of five books on dog behavior. She returns to the GAZETTE after an eight-month hiatus.

GAZETTE, Dog Trainer's Diary, August 1991, pp 31-32.