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## Clinical Report: Dealing with outdated behavior recommendations

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Are you or your staff recommending that clients learn more by watching such shows as “The Dog Whisperer”? If so, you could be doing more harm than good.

“The Dog Whisperer” and similar animal behavior shows that focus on punishment and dominance-based dog training do have some benefits, says Debra Horwitz, DVM, DACVB, president of the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists. “These shows make owners aware that others have problems with their pets and that owners are not alone. The show hosts also talk about the need for dogs to exercise and have rules, both of which are good advice.”

But, Horwitz adds, the shows also have major drawbacks. “These trainers usually attribute behavior problems to dominance when the dog may be misbehaving because it is fearful or anxious.”

### A faulty premise

Indeed, dominance-based trainers fail to recognize that dominance is a relationship between two individuals that is established by force, aggression and submission over priority access to resources, such as food, preferred resting spots and mates. In such a relationship, a higher rank is only attained once one individual chooses to defer on a regular basis.<sup>1,2</sup> Trainers tend to mistakenly interpret dominance as a characteristic of an individual animal and attribute most misbehavior to a desire to attain higher rank.

Horwitz, who is on the FORUM Editorial Board, explains that such attribution is faulty. “Many behaviors do not fit into the paradigm of dominant–subordinate relationships. For instance, if a dog barks at people when they walk by and the owner yells at the dog to stop, it probably does not understand that the yelling means it should be silent. Instead, the dog may be thinking that its job is to guard its territory.” Usually this means that the dog has not been taught to be quiet on cue, she adds.

So what’s the harm in getting the motivations for misbehavior wrong? “The problem with the dominance approach,” she says, “is that if owners think every bad behavior is caused by their dog trying to control them rather than realizing that many of the serious behavior problems are because of fear and anxiety, the owners may feel they have to control the dog rather than teach it a new and preferred response.”

One example of the poor results associated with the punishment approach is when a dog barks at young children. A dog that is fearful of children often has learned that offense is the best defense. It may bark or even growl and lunge at approaching children to keep them away. Rather than addressing the underlying fear, the typical force- or dominance-based trainer teaches owners to use verbal, choke chain or pinch collar corrections to stop the barking. Often, the problem becomes worse.

### Masking the problem

John Ciribassi, president of the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior (AVSAB), explains how punishment can eventually deteriorate or worsen a dog’s behavior problem. “The drawback with using punishment is that all the owner is doing is suppressing behavior temporarily without modifying the reason or the cause of the behavior in the first place.” In the case of the barking dog, punishment-based correction may suppress the barking but fails to resolve the underlying fear.

Furthermore, Ciribassi says, "The dog can associate the punishment with the child, increasing the likelihood of aggression to the child in future situations." This combination of masking the outward expression of fear while continuing to expose the dog to the source of the fear — children — can lead to a situation in which a dog eventually attacks without warning.

According to Ciribassi, even when fear isn't involved, punishment can have adverse effects. "Punishment interferes with the bond that exists between owner and animal. A problem can arise when a dog stops trusting the owner because it is unable to consistently anticipate what the owner is going to do in a given situation." This occurs when owners punish inconsistently, he adds. Sometimes owners might reward the dog for the same behavior that they punish at other times. Even worse, because punishment is often a consequence of the owner's anger, it may be delegated after the bad behavior has occurred rather than while the dog is in the act. Punishment also may be overly intense or last too long.

One might assume that these adverse effects are rare, but they are common enough and sufficiently detrimental that the AVSAB guidelines on the "Use of Punishment for Dealing with Behavior Problems in Animals" emphasizes that "the standard of care for veterinarians specializing in behavior is that punishment is not to be used as a first-line or early use treatment for behavior problems. Consequently, the AVSAB recommends that general practitioners should follow suit."<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, Horwitz, Ciribassi and the AVSAB say that punishment should not be banned. Instead, they emphasize that a major problem with punishment is that it only tells the animal what it should not do and fails to direct the animal to more appropriate behavior.

Horwitz and Ciribassi stress that modification should focus on reinforcing desired behaviors, removing the reinforcer for inappropriate behaviors and addressing the emotional state and environmental conditions driving the undesirable behavior. This approach provides a better understanding of the pet's behavior.

Furthermore, the AVSAB guidelines recommend that punishment should be supervised only by individuals who can and do articulate the major adverse effects of punishment to the pet owner, can judge when these effects are occurring over the short- and long-term and can explain how they will attempt to reverse the adverse effects if they arise.

## References

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3. American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior: *AVSAB Guidelines on the Use of Punishment for Dealing with Animal Behavior Problems*. 2007;1–3. Available at: [www.AVSABonline.org](http://www.AVSABonline.org). Accessed November 2007.