



Tails of Success

The gentle, effective way to right your dog gone wrong

Think Positive! Training Dogs with Trust and Understanding

by Sherri Romig (2008)

When I first began my career as a dog trainer, I worked for a man who was still using the old-fashioned, compulsion style of dog training. This style involves the use of equipment like prong collars or choke chains and giving the dog collar corrections for misbehavior.

My very first day on the job, I sat in with him as he gave a private lesson to a six-month old Shepard puppy with a jumping problem. He put the prong collar on the dog and told the client he was going to set the dog up to learn that jumping is wrong. Holding the end of the leash, he told the puppy's mom to pat her chest and encourage the dog to jump up on her. The puppy jumped, the trainer pulled the leash, and the puppy screamed. The trainer, pleased with his work, told the client he had just trained her dog not to jump.

What seemed clear to me was that what he had *actually* taught the dog was that people, even his own mom, can't be trusted. She had just asked him to do something that had resulted in pain when he complied. I was devastated. I wanted to train dogs because I love and respect them. How could I do a job that would require me to punish puppies for doing what their people asked them to do?

The prevalence of this style of training in Rochester shocks and saddens me. I simply cannot understand it. Why would the very people who choose to dedicate their lives to working with dogs decide to use this method when there is another way, a way that never causes a dog fear or pain in the name of education.

Positive methods of training are not new. They have been used for decades by trainers who work with wild and exotic animals, including marine mammals. Imagine putting a choke collar on a whale or a crocodile! Yet both animals have been successfully trained using positive, reward based methods. If we can gently train a crocodile to go into a cage on cue, why do we still use force to train our dogs?

One of the things about dogs that makes them so wonderful, a reason they have been invited into our homes as companion animals, is that are so adaptable and can be so easily trained. Believe it or not, our dogs actually want to do what we want them to do! They want to be good and make us happy, we just have to show them how. Our attention and affection are extremely rewarding to dogs, which is just one reason we love them so much.

In the old way of training, we would set our dogs up failure by waiting for them to make a mistake and then pulling the chain. Think about how many mistakes it is possible for a dog to make. Wouldn't it be so much easier if instead of waiting for the dog to mess up, we simply showed him what it is we **do** want him to do? With positive training, this is exactly what we do. We set our dogs up for success and then reward them for doing the right thing. Just as behavior that is punished tends to decrease, behavior that is rewarded will be repeated. Before long, we will find that our dogs are consistently offering good behaviors because they know exactly what is expected of them.

Imagine again the scenario of the jumping dog. Dogs that have jumping problems are almost always seeking attention. What if instead of punishing the puppy for jumping, the client had simply taught him that anytime he came over and sat in front of her, she would lavish affection on him. Before long, the puppy would constantly be coming over and offering a sit, and a puppy who is sitting is a puppy who is not jumping. Problem solved, no force or corrections needed. This puppy would still have complete trust in his mom.

I am not arguing that the correction method of dog training does not work. Go into any obedience class trained using this style and, at first glance, you will see a roomful of well-behaved, obedient dogs. But take a second look. These dogs are not having fun. Their tails are down, they are watching their handlers, not with adoration, but for fear of missing a cue and receiving a correction. Fear-prone or sensitive dogs will be showing obvious signs of stress.

Now walk into an obedience class taught using only positive methods. At first glance, these dogs will appear to be equally well-trained and obedient. Again, take a closer look. The difference will amaze you. These dogs are actually having fun at school! Their eyes are bright, tails wagging, and there are smiles on dogs and handlers alike.

When we train our dogs using methods of correction, we are training away the very essence of what makes or dogs so wonderful. They become so worried about offering the "wrong" behavior and receiving a correction, that it becomes simpler for them just to offer no behavior at all. How sad it must be for them to live in constant fear of making a mistake.

Contrast this to dogs trained using only positive methods. Having never received a painful correction, these dogs have complete trust in their humans. They are free to be themselves and try to offer behaviors that will be praised and rewarded. It is in these animals that we can really see what being a dog is all about: unconditional love and trust, devotion, and a delightful sense of humor. These are the traits that have made dogs so endearing to us, the traits for which dogs have become beloved family members. Why we would ever want to train this way?