

Cesar Milan: The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly

In the 1970's, dominance based training methods became incredibly popular due to an unfortunate study based on the relationships between captive wolves. These methods espoused using any type of physical force necessary in order to dominate your dog. Many aggressive dogs were labeled "dominant" and were treated as such by "trainers". I began training dogs under this umbrella. Luckily for me, and for the dogs I come into contact with today, I now know better. Sadly, some trainers still languish in the mistaken theories of the '70's, unwilling or possibly unable to learn better, safer, more effective techniques.

I will admit that change is difficult. To do so means you must admit to yourself that what you are doing may be wrong and that you need to learn and grow. Some people are able to do this. Others are not.

What we know about the way animals learn has come a long way. We now know you can shape and mold just about any behavior into an animal that you desire - using positive reinforcement - so long as you have the correct knowledge and timing. Dog training is about Consistency, Patience and Leadership. I think the Leadership part is where a lot of folks get confused. An effective Leader is not just "dominant". An effective leader is calm, confident, educated, fair and consistent. The very word "dominant" immediately sets us up for an adversarial relationship with our pets

Understand this. Most dogs are not innately dominant. They have no desire to be dominant. Your dog doesn't ignore your commands because he's trying to take over the world, or even because he's stubborn, it is because you have not learned how to teach him to engage in appropriate behaviors in any kind of consistent manner. In order to be well-adjusted, behaved companions, dogs need leadership. Sadly, we humans often make a series of mistakes that force our dogs into leadership roles that they are not comfortable with. This alone can cause aggression. The majority of aggression in dogs is caused by fear/anxiety mixed with lack of leadership. These dogs usually can be retrained so long as we learn how to think about things on their level.

Now, I am not arguing that Milan's methods don't give the illusion of resulting in "cure" for some of the animals he works with. If you strangle a dog until he passes out from lack of oxygen each time he growls at another dog, he WILL stop growling. But, you will not have addressed the root cause (fear/anxiety and lack of leadership) that caused the growling in the first place. What you will have done is created a dog that is still just as fearful, but now will not give you any warning when he does attack. Unfortunately, Cesar is simply forcing these poor pets into a state of "learned helplessness" for a period of time. I'll explain what that means a little later.

What educated, board-certified behaviorists are at odds with are the old-school methods Cesar (and others like him) employs in order to achieve what he perceives as a "cure". For those of us who have trained dogs using both the older punishment focused techniques and the science-based positive reinforcement/learning theory techniques, we can tell you that you stand to gain much more from the humane methods. You will create a much more trustworthy companion who actually enjoys training versus an animal who has been made even more uncomfortable in certain situations and who only "behaves" because to do otherwise would risk pain.

These methods can (and often do) cause aggression levels to increase. Have you ever heard the expression "You can't treat fire with fire"? Well, the same holds true with aggression. Typically aggression + aggression = aggression squared. Just imagine if you were scared and fighting for your life and someone yelled at you to "calm down" then zapped you with electricity or started choking you. How relaxed do you believe you would become in similar situations? Punishment training often results in an animal that becomes a ticking time bomb. When inexperienced people apply punishment based training techniques, what they usually accomplish is a reduction in "warning signs". i.e., the dog will no longer growl at you because growling results in punishment. You still have a dog who is in a panicked/aggressive who will now no longer growl prior to attacking you. Very dangerous. We must change the dog's underlying emotional state in order to change the behavior.

The "Good" -well, sort of: While there are few redeemable qualities in regards to the methods of training that Milan uses, there are some tenants that are positive: Dogs need Exercise, Discipline, and Affection. Many, many behavior problems seen in dogs today could be solved or averted if our pets had access to adequate, daily exercise, Discipline in the form of consistently enforced rational rules and regulation and enough affection to apply those rules in a safe and humane manner.

Cesar is incredibly confident around dogs and (judging from the sheer number of bites he endures) is not afraid of being bitten. Now being confident is a real plus, not being afraid of being bitten is real stupid. A lot can be learned by watching Cesar's calm, confident manner. He simply does not allow dogs to engage in aggressive behavior by physically restraining them. It is his chosen mode of physical restraint (hanging/choking with no release) that is so troubling. The majority of owners should not emulate his style as it is aggressive and dangerous and will result in you being bitten. There are much safer, more humane, scientifically valid ways available to rehabilitate dogs.

The Bad and The Ugly: Milan consistently "floods" the dog with the scenario with which they are most fearful and, thus, most aggressive. He provokes the aggressive behavior, then he physically restrains (typically chokes/strangles) them until they "submit". The dogs are then exhausted and oxygen deprived and generally give up or pass out. This creates a situation called "learned helplessness". Cesar calls it a "calm,. submissive state". It would be laughable if it weren't so horrifying.

Now, learned helplessness can result in a dog that (at least temporarily) simply no longer engages in the aggressive behavior. But, you have not addressed the reason for the dog's aggression. Let's look at why most dogs will aggress in any given situation.

1. Most behavior problems boil down to two issues: 1. Leadership/Anxiety and 2. Basic Obedience/A Job to Do. Let's visit each of these:

1. Leadership/Respect: Dogs have a completely different set of rules and instincts and speak a completely different language than we do. It is up to us as the "smarter" of the two species to learn how to interact with and instruct them in a manner that they can understand. It is also up to us to create a set of consistent rules so as not to create confusion. Dogs need leadership. Without it, they become anxious. Your dog is confused and nervous about a leadership role that he or she doesn't want and you're practically setting the stage for a variety of behavior/aggression problems. There are several steps you can take to easily and humanely establish leadership in your household:

a. Take positive reinforcement obedience classes, read at least two books on positive dog training. Visit any or all of the following websites to learn about appropriate leadership and training techniques. www.askdryin.com, www.abrionline.org or www.clickertraining.com, www.dogscouts.org, . The more you learn about how to communicate with your dog, the better your relationship will be.

FOCUS ON "HOW DO I LEARN TO TRAIN THE BEHAVIOR I DO WANT". NOT "HOW DO I PUNISH OUT THE BEHAVIOR I DON'T WANT". Ask me about the following:

- b. Nothing in Life is Free
- c. Waiting at Doors
- d. Teaching "out" and "off"
- e. You Eat First
- f. Interactions at Your Initiative

g. Ditch the Dish:

h. Obedience Classes

Remember, respect and love are not the same thing and should not be confused. You can love someone tremendously yet have no respect for them. This is the situation in many of our households with both our dogs and our children. We are failing in our responsibility to be effective leaders. We don't teach our dogs what we want and then when we request obedience and they don't comply (because we are unclear or unrealistic in our expectations) we become more aggressive in our tactics because our dogs are just plain "stubborn". Let me make it clear that your dog is not currently sitting at home plotting ways to "spite" you. The thought is ridiculous. Your dog loves life most when you are happy. Don't you agree? Why would he seek a way to make you angry with him?

Ask me about these classic examples of humans applying "human" rules instead of learning how a dog thinks:

Come When Called

Food/Possessive Aggression

That brings us to:

2. Obedience/A Job to Do: Think about this for a moment. You have your job, your family, your commitments, your bills, your entertainment, your hobbies and on and on - a million things to do on any given day usually done at warp speed. Your dog has..... YOU. Dogs need a job, a function. They need daily exercise and mental stimulation. Many are practically exploding with boredom. What to do with all that energy? Find ways to include your dog. Take your dog everywhere you can. Take obedience and/or agility classes. Learn how to teach your dog functional tricks like retrieving certain items (shoes, boots, keys, blankets, etc.). They can even be taught to help bring in the groceries. Don't feed your dog from a bowl - buy a "food puzzle" or use your pet's meals as training treats. The more you teach your dog using consistent, educated leadership, the more confident and relaxed he will become.

Now we know there are much safer, proven, humane methods available. Why is it, then, that trainers such as Milan continue to enjoy such popularity when their uneducated theories and old-school, violent techniques result in such emotional and physical damage to our pets? I have a couple of thoughts on this.

1. Humans are capable of easily understanding "dominance" theory and "might makes right". We are, sadly, a very violent species and it is more difficult for us to learn how to identify and reinforce the behaviors we DO want versus trying to punish out the behaviors we DON'T want. For example: To teach a dog not to jump you can either go the punishment route (push him off you, pinch his toes, yell, yank a leash, etc.) or you can go the positive route (turn away when your dog jumps, never touch him or her for jumping, reward and reinforce sitting - Learn how to achieve proper timing with reinforcements by using a trainer). Unfortunately we seem ridiculously attached to the theory that our dogs want to take over the world and training failures are due to their stubbornness rather than our lack of knowledge.

Please remember this when you get a puppy. You are now responsible for the care and well-being of a toddler of a species that DOES NOT INATELY understand human language or rules. Challenge yourself. Learn to "speak dog". Learn scientifically proven methods for training your dog that will result in a lifetime of great behavior and a fantastic relationship between you and your canine friend.