

Dogs, Cats, and Other People: Confessions of a dog abuser

by Matthew_Margolis

What do the following comments have in common?

"I've given her tongue lashings that would wake the dead and ostracized her to the point of feeling guilty like an abusive jailer."

"I've bitten her on the neck and stared her straight in the eyes."

"I use a pronged training collar, which makes a world of difference."

"When she goes after my hand, I push it farther into her mouth."

"What can I do? I have scolded her, slapped her, isolated her, but nothing seems to work."

Answer: They are all confessions of dog abusers.

These were nonchalant comments dropped by ignorant people in the course of explaining to me the problem with their dog. What they don't realize is that the dog is not the problem.

Their dog does not obey. His behavior is embarrassing. They are frustrated. Exhausted. At their wits' end. And on and on. But none of the dogs subjected to the abuse laid out above were ever trained. In all fairness, how high should the expectations be?

One woman said, "He won't come to me."

I asked her whether he had been trained to "come."

She said, "Well, I bought him. Shouldn't he come to me?"

A signature on a check means nothing to a dog – and neither do the words "come" and "no" unless you teach him.

None of the "techniques" quoted above constitute teaching or training. Most of them were bad ideas pulled from the Internet in a misguided attempt to fix a serious problem. If you were diagnosed with cancer, would you turn to the Internet to nail down a treatment plan? Would you heed the advice found on Orville's Free Oncology blog? Of course not. You'd turn to a doctor, a professional, a specialist.

We're not treating cancer here, but we are dealing with situations that do become dangerous when not properly managed.

In dealing with dogs, our voices and hands are tools to shower love, praise and affection. The voice should be pleasant; the hands, soothing. This is how we earn the trust of our canine companions, and it usually isn't hard to do. They want to please us. They're ready to trust us. They love to love us. Far and away it is we who do not readily know how to love.

Stepping on paws, pulling tails, whacking noses with newspaper, shoving fists down throats, yelling, shocking, isolating, kicking, hitting – all abuse.

I can understand ignorance; not everyone knows how to raise and train a dog. That's why I have a job.

What I can't understand or condone is abuse disguised as dog training. The dog learns nothing except to fear you – rightfully so. And you accomplish nothing except to destroy the beautiful spirit of an animal and let loose on the world yet another fearful dog.

Why so many dog bites in the United States? Why so many dogs in our shelters? I'll give you a hint: The dog isn't the problem.

Woof!

Dog trainer Matthew "Uncle Matty" Margolis is co-author of 18 books about dogs, a behaviorist, a popular radio and television guest, and host of the PBS series "WOOF! It's a Dog's Life!" Send your questions to

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