

## **Dog training has evolved for the better**

**By Lisa Bloch**

There are many things I love about working in animal welfare. One is that it's an evolving field. The more we learn about animals (and the humans connected to them), the more our strategies and methods for helping both change.

This is illustrated on a large scale, like the rise in demand for farm animals to be treated more humanely; a community level, like the now-common practice of spay/neuter to reduce the number of unwanted pets; and a more personal level, like a family taking the time to train their new pet to set them up for success using humane techniques.

The area of dog training has definitely evolved over the years. For a long time, the science behind dog behavior wasn't given much thought and dogs were trained with harsh discipline. (Remember the old swat-them-over-the-nose-with-a-rolled-up-newspaper method?) However, a study on wolves — which later proved inherently flawed — convinced generations to believe the “alpha myth.” This myth convinced people they needed to “teach their dog who was in charge” by doing things like never letting their dog walk through a door first, never letting them on the bed, and worse, physically overpowering them “just to show who's boss.” The popular but not-well-respected trainer Cesar Millan based his philosophy on now-debunked animal studies and some of his techniques — most famously the alpha roll, in which he pins a dog on its back and holds it by the throat — are not only ineffective in the long term but inhumane.

Punishment-based training, including the use of shock or prong collars, not only causes pain and discomfort for your dog, it can make behavioral problems worse. If your dog experiences pain whenever it tries to greet another dog, or person or move toward something on a walk, over time they can begin to associate pain with objects in the environment like other dogs or people passing by. These associations can lead to fear, anxiety, and aggression.

According to noted dog trainer Victoria Stilwell, “Even though supporters of electronic (or shock) training might praise the effectiveness of the method, dogs

trained using these tools only comply out of fear of what will happen if they do not comply — the dog is not truly being obedient. Shock collars may cease a behavior in the moment, but the severe stress and anxiety they cause can lead to more aggression in the future and can create entirely new behavioral problems. Several countries have already instated bans on shock collars, and it is only a matter of time before other countries will follow.”

Thankfully, most trainers all over the world now embrace positive reinforcement-only training, with great results. Positive reinforcement training identifies the things that a dog likes and dispenses them as rewards for positive behavior. This training method turns dogs into eager participants, willing to experiment with different behaviors because they aren't afraid of being punished. Training becomes an interactive partnership, rather than something that's being done to one individual by another. Positive training also becomes an important bonding experience for guardian and dog.

We share our lives with animals to experience a bond that transcends species, so it's time we stop relying on training methods that damage that bond.

For more information about dog training at Marin Humane, go to [marinhumane.org/oh-behave](http://marinhumane.org/oh-behave).

Lisa Bloch is the marketing and communications director at Marin Humane, which contributes Tails of Marin articles and welcomes animal-related questions about the people and animals in our community. Go to [marinhumane.org](http://marinhumane.org), find us on social media @marinhumane, or email [lbloch@marinhumane.org](mailto:lbloch@marinhumane.org).