

## Myth 95: Dog trainers know what they're talking about.

Not all dog trainers have had any real education about animal behaviour. Many start out by taking their own first dog to a club or school to find out how to train it. They get along great with the teachers. They do as they are told without asking too many questions about the techniques they're learning. They learn these techniques quickly and enthusiastically. Because they are such good and obedient students, they are eventually offered the chance to become a trainer. These people have learned everything they know at the club: their entire knowledge about dogs consists of the club's story. This is usually a story about ranks and dominance and the choke chain. Sometimes it's a story about how to give a reward at exactly the right moment and getting a high rank for yourself by psychological tricks. The club story is a sort of Holy Revelation. No one knows where it came from. All they know is that it's been handed down for years and years, and that everyone believes in it, and therefore it must be true. And because their own dog sits when they say so, these trainers are absolutely sure they know all about dogs and all about how animals, and dogs in particular, learn.

These clubs are often closed cliques. They often discourage students from looking for knowledge outside their own circle. To have any hope of being allowed to join the trainers' ranks, you must never contradict the trainers. You must never ask difficult questions or challenge anything they tell you. People who do ask questions are often belittled and bullied. If they persist, they are thrown out of the club. The club's Holy Revelation ends up never being revised, corrected or updated.

Some of the so-called positive trainers do this, too. It's just that they so happened to link up at the beginning with a different club than the choke chain club. Positive dog trainers base their training mostly on rewards, using treats, the clicker and other friendly techniques. The cute thing about these people is that they are basically doing the right thing, but they have no idea why their tricks work (see also Myth 70). It's good luck if the dog school you picked out in the Yellow Pages uses so-called 'positive' training. Many of these trainers will still tell you the same fiction the choke chain clubs tell, all about ranks and dominance, but this isn't immediately of crucial importance. Your dog will be trained according to a scientifically sound system — rewarding behaviour you like, giving the dog lots of space to make mistakes without being punished as she searches for the right response. As long as this is all that happens, your dog can be trained here without ending up damaged.

However, the 'positive' in some positive trainers disappears as soon as the dog does something unexpected, or as soon as the trainer starts to get frustrated. If these trainers don't understand why their methods usually work, they then also don't understand why their techniques sometimes don't work. This is the moment when they start telling the story about ranks and dominant personalities in dogs. This is the point where some 'positive' trainers might decide it's time for punishment. They don't tell you to get a choke chain; instead, they have you jerk the dog's head upwards with some kind of head halter to force your dog to sit. They don't know that this is much more dangerous for the dog's spine and brain than jerking on a choke chain — it's just their way of kidding themselves that they still aren't using punishment. Sometimes they'll tell you to throw a can of coins or marbles at the dog, or your key chain, again pretending this isn't really punishment because it isn't painful. They forget that you are taking the

risk of wounding the dog if you aim wrong and hit, for example, an eye. Or that even if you don't accidentally wound your dog, he will still develop a fear response to the sound. Sometimes they'll tell you to use the plant spray to aim a jet of water right at the dog's face when he does something you don't like. There are lots of punishments that 'positive' trainers can use when the going gets rough, all the while kidding themselves that they are still better than the other club and unaware that these punishments can also have serious side effects — as all punishment tends to do.

So the main problem with dog trainers is that they are all too often the product of small, closed clubs whose members constantly reassure each other back and forth that they already know everything about dogs — it's all to be found in the club's Holy Dogma. In their self-satisfaction and conceit, they will not allow others to contradict them. This is a result of various aspects of human psychology that are beyond the scope of this book. (When a person becomes convinced, for whatever reason, that s/he already knows everything there is to know, they stop looking for new knowledge. They are unaware that this attitude always marks the beginning of true ignorance.)

Not all trainers reject continuing learning. Many genuinely are trying to keep up and constantly improve their understanding of dogs. But they run into another obstacle, namely the fact that new knowledge is often fragmented, spread around in specialised scientific journals, many of which are inaccessible to the general public owing to extremely high subscription fees. There is also the problem of judging the value of a scientific work. After all, many scientists are, just like the layman, stuck in the old myths that Lorenz spread around (see Myth 10).

That's why this book is so important.

There are many dog trainers who have no idea what they're talking about, no matter how strongly they believe they do. These trainers learned a club dogma, which they pass on to their students. Sometimes one dogma is accidentally less damaging to our pets than other dogmas, but even then, some trainers don't even know why.

**Fact:** Be wary of every trainer who urges you to use physical punishment of any kind with your dog, or one who wants you to rely on doing unpleasant things to him. One good test of a trainer is whether s/he can teach a new trick to an unleashed dog. Because the fact is, a good trainer doesn't only not need a choke chain, s/he doesn't need a leash at all. If a dog is loosed and free on the field, a good trainer is able to get and keep her attention and knows how to seduce her into voluntarily taking part in an activity. If you are working with a trainer who can't do this, if your trainer becomes helpless when you take away the leash, then it's time to look for a new trainer.

**Fact:** Another sign that it's time to look for a new trainer is if yours is not willing to answer any and all questions you have without making you feel belittled, bullied, stupid or ridiculous. You have a right to ask questions and to understand what you are doing with your dog. You have a right to express doubts and get a serious answer. There is no such thing as a stupid question, and you shouldn't be made to feel there is.

### **Askew's view**

'If there is one major difference between today's academically qualified veterinarian, psychologist, or biologist practitioners and the academically unqualified dog trainer who advertises his or her services as a 'pet behaviour therapist', 'dog psychologist', or 'canine behaviourist', it is the following: while academically qualified practitioners know that true competence can only be achieved by a combination of extensive counselling experience with a comprehensive knowledge of the interdisciplinary scientific literature, dog trainers are confident that they have learned everything they need to know about how to solve dog behaviour problems in their obedience schools.' (*Treatment of Behaviour Problems in Dogs and Cats*: p.59)

### **An exception to the unleashed-dog trainer test**

If your dog has an aggression problem, it is perfectly legitimate for the trainer to ask you to keep the dog leashed for a while, until a number of trust-building exercises have been completed and it's safe to unleash him. However, the leash is purely a safety measure for the humans involved. The leash is kept limp at all times, except when the dog tightens it by lunging or pulling in an attempt to lash out. The leash is not used to jerk the dog around, hurt him, force him to follow anyone, force him to cooperate, nor in any other way as a tool in the training itself. The dog should be unaware (as much as possible) that he is leashed at all. After all, the whole point of training is to get a dog to regard humans as the source of good things, and to get him to the point where he both wants to cooperate and feels safe doing so.

Askew, HR, *Treatment of Behaviour Problems in Dogs and Cats: A guide for the small Animal Veterinarian*, Blackwell Science, London, 1996.

Personal experience with tens of trainers and clubs, internet forums, discussion groups, all of which experience support Askew's (and my own) remarks about club trainers and dogmas.

Hild, R, Cults in dog Training, [http://www3.sympatico.ca/tsuro/\\_articles/cults\\_training.html](http://www3.sympatico.ca/tsuro/_articles/cults_training.html), accessed 12 January 2009.