THE IMPACT OF TRAINING RECOMMENDATIONS ON PATIENTS AND CLIENTS

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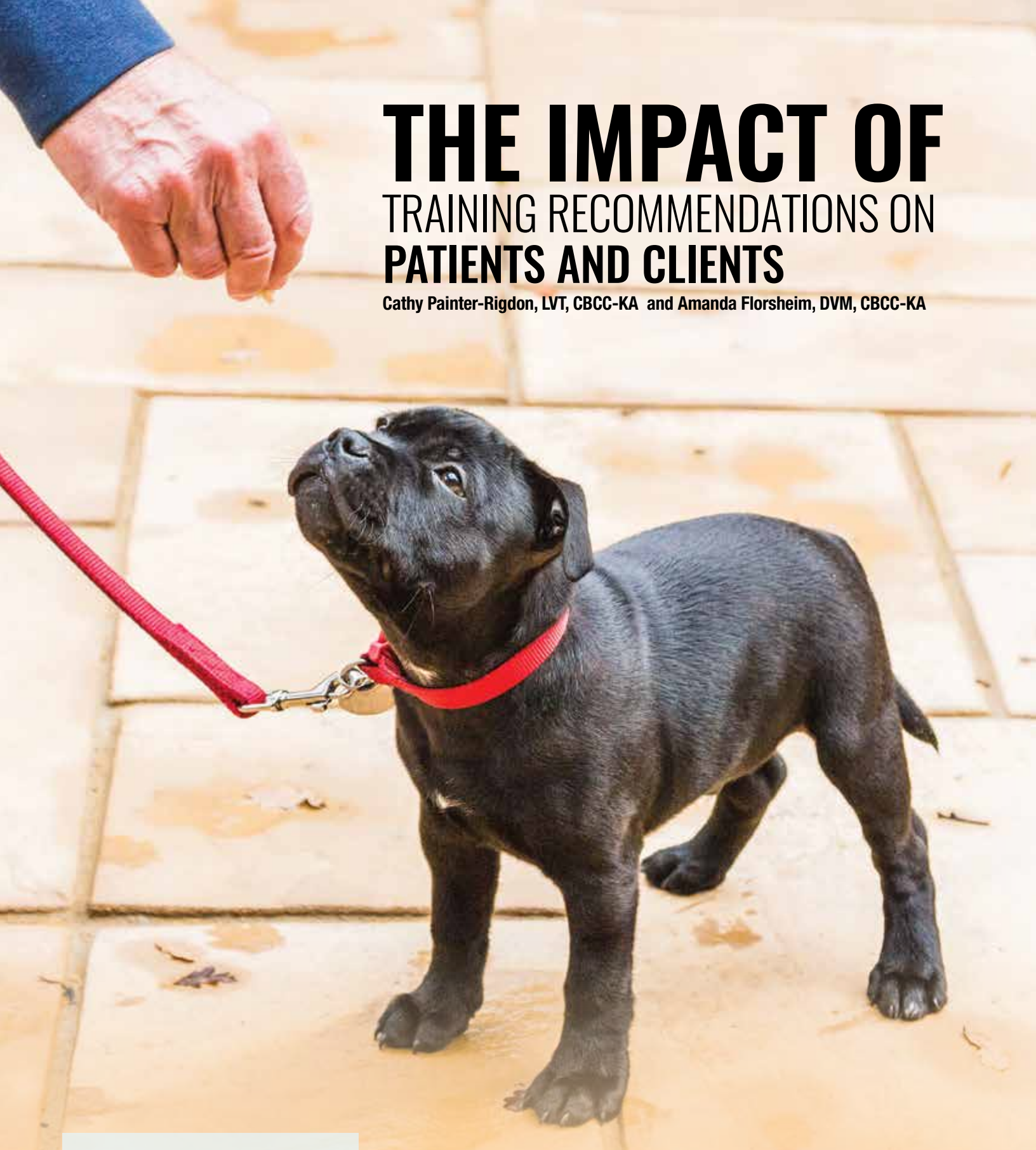

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Learning Objective: After reading this article, participants will have a basic knowledge of learning theory, recognize outdated training methods and describe why those methods may create or exacerbate problem behaviors. Additionally, participants will discern the importance of interviewing trainers or behavior consultants before making recommendations to clients.

Behavior related issues are cited as a significant factor in more than half of all pets relinquished to shelters.[1] When clients ask the veterinary team for help with a behavior problem, who should be recommended? It is essential to endorse a professional behaviorist or trainer with proper skills and knowledge. When inappropriate training methods are used, it can result in patient suffering, client dissatisfaction, and ultimately in the relinquishment or euthanasia of the pet.

Veterinary professionals have a responsibility to provide clients with the best information that is currently available. Fifty years ago, research into canine behavior was limited and it was commonly thought that dogs were pack animals that constantly vied with humans for leadership.[2] Current research disputes traditional theories, and although the knowledge of learning theory and canine behavior has long since evolved, training techniques are slow to follow. Two particularly problematic concepts are dominance and pack theory.

Dominance and Pack Theory

In behavior terminology, dominance describes hierarchical status between animals in a social group. A more dominant animal has priority access to resources.[3] Some species have a strict social hierarchy where the dominant animal maintains priority access over all other animals in the group. Research with various groups of *Canis familiaris* indicates the relationship between dogs in a social group is much more fluid than this.[4,5] For example, dog-A might have priority access to food, while dog-B has priority access to a favored resting spot.

During behavior consultations, clients often report being told by previous trainers that they should stare down, yell-at, alpha roll, choke, throw items at, or shock their dogs to show dominance. While many dogs may tolerate this type of handling, they are not learning the intended lesson. Some dogs, likely out of fear for their own safety, react aggressively. Rather than recognizing and respecting the fear response, dogs in this population are often labeled "dominant." This erroneous label can contribute to a downward-spiral with the owner attempting to be more "dominant" while the dog responds with escalating aggression.

In reality, it is unlikely the dog is striving for status when interacting with his owner.[5] For example, the dog may get on the furniture because it is a comfortable place to rest, not because lying on the couch makes him feel superior to his owner. Dogs often jump on owners when seeking attention rather than trying to challenge the owner's authority. If a dog is yelled at, spanked or choked for this behavior, he may learn not to jump; however, it is doubtful the dog interprets spanking as a sign of the owner's superior rank.[3]

A pet owner controls what and how much the dog eats, where the dog spends its time, who it meets, when it is allowed to eliminate, how much time it spends with others in the social group, and where it rests. By the nature of the relationship, the owner is in control.

Pack theory is similar to dominance theory in that clients report being told they have to be the alpha or their dog will try to assume that role. They are told to perform the same "dominance-type" behaviors described above so the dog will understand its position in the "pack." This theory assumes that wolf packs depend on the alpha actively asserting dominance over the other wolves and that dog behavior mimics that of wolves. However, wild wolf packs usually consist of a breeding pair of parents and one to three years of their offspring. They hunt together for food and the older wolves help care for their younger siblings.[4] In most cases, the young wolves do not challenge their parents. Instead, they disperse and form their own packs when they mature. Unlike wolves, dogs form loose social bonds with unrelated animals, are promiscuous breeders, are more likely to scavenge than hunt and the bitch cares for the young alone.[5] Therefore, pet dogs lack many key characteristics that define a "pack." As with dominance theory, the argument that a human must struggle with a dog over the "alpha" role lacks merit.[3]

Recommending trainers who use dominance or pack status as a guide for their training is a disservice to the client. When clients act on their advice it can be very dangerous for the client and dog. Of special interest to the veterinary team is that dogs trained using dominance or pack theory-based techniques may become mistrustful of handling, which can manifest as aggression during veterinary exams. For a more desired outcome, a trainer should teach by the principles of operant conditioning (learning by consequences). Stated simply, behaviors that achieve desired outcomes will be repeated, while behaviors that result in undesired outcomes will occur less frequently.

Principles of Operant Conditioning

Any specific behavior can be broken down into the "ABC's". **A**ntecedents are preceding factors that lead to the behavior occurring. **B**ehavior is the measurable action or activity that is of concern. **C**onsequence is the outcome of the behavior. The consequence of the behavior can

The following questions should be asked when interviewing a trainer:

Do you use treats when you train?

Possible educated responses

- "Yes, absolutely".
- "Treats are an effective way to tell the dog he did well".
- "Teaching new behavior is fast and fun for the dog when treats are used".
- "Food is a primary reinforcer."

Possible uneducated responses

- "No—the dog should do what the person wants without bribes".
- "Never use treats; the dog will become dominant to the owner if it is coddled".
- "Alpha dogs don't use treats to get what they want".

What training tools do you commonly use?

Possible educated responses

- "Body harnesses can really help".
- "Head collars, if used correctly".
- "A treat pouch is a necessity".
- "Remote treat dispensers are great".

Possible uneducated responses

- "Shock collars are appropriate for some dogs".
- "Choke collars".
- "Citronella bark collars".

(Any tool meant to suppress behavior without teaching an appropriate response)

What do you recommend clients do when their dog growls at someone?

Possible educated responses

- "Growling is a normal behavior that warns a bite is coming. Don't punish the growl or the dog may start biting without bothering to growl".
- "A growl is communication that the dog is uncomfortable. Look at the situation and try to help the dog feel better. If he is comfortable, he has no need to growl".
- "Growling is high on the ladder of aggression. Stop what you are doing and reassess the situation and your behavior".

Possible uneducated responses

- "Shock/choke/hit the dog".
- "Use an alpha roll; a growling dog is trying to be boss".
- "Stare the dog down".
- "Get in the dog's space and pressure him until he submits".

be desirable or undesirable to the animal and will predict the likelihood of the behavior occurring again in similar circumstances.[4] Consequences can be reinforcing in which the behavior increases, or punishing, in which the behavior decreases. The terms positive and negative are used with the consequence to further describe the training situation. If something (for example: praise, food, yelling or shock) is added then "positive" is affixed to the consequence. If something (for example: attention or an aversive sensation) is subtracted from the situation then "negative" is affixed to the consequence. When used to describe the type of reinforcement or punishment, the terms positive and negative are not qualifiers—they purely refer to adding and subtracting.

To illustrate this concept, consider the behaviors "sit" and unwanted jumping:

To teach "sit" using **positive reinforcement**, the trainer will feed the dog a treat or give him a favorite toy just after he sits. If the behavior increases (dog sits more often) then the behavior has been reinforced. Since there is an addition to the situation (treat or toy), the dog has been positively reinforced.

To teach "sit" using **negative reinforcement**, the trainer pulls the leash upward until the dog sits. When the dog sits, the trainer releases the pressure on the dog's neck. If the dog sits more, the behavior has been reinforced. Since pressure is subtracted from the situation, the dog has been negatively reinforced. By definition, punishment decreases behavior. Instead of teaching new behavior, punishment is used to reduce or eliminate an existing behavior. Some trainers recommend kicking a dog when it jumps on a person. If the jumping behavior is reduced then it has been punished. Because a kick was *added* it is considered **positive punishment**.

If a dog jumps on a person and the person leaves the room and jumping is reduced, then the jumping behavior was punished. In this scenario, the presence of the human was *subtracted* so it is considered **negative punishment**.

Keep in mind that the animal determines what he finds reinforcing and punishing. For example, if the dog in the last scenario jumped more frequently, not less, then negative reinforcement was achieved instead of negative punishment by removing an aversive (the person) to increase the behavior.

Trainers using positive reinforcement reward the pet when it succeeds. For example, a puppy that wants to chew on the owner's hand will be given an assortment of appropriate toys for chewing. When the puppy redirects to a chew toy, the owner is advised to praise the puppy or give it a treat. If the puppy continues to

bite the owner's hand instead of the toys, the trainer advises the owner to end play.

Trainers using positive punishment expect an animal will reduce the frequency of a behavior to avoid undesired consequences. In the example above, the trainer would advise hitting the puppy on the nose (positive punishment) each time it bites.

Effective training depends on good timing of the consequence for the dog to learn the intended lesson.[6] When a professional trainer asks an owner to practice techniques with their dog, one can expect the timing of the owner will not be exact. If an owner has bad timing when using positive reinforcement, the behavior may not improve. If an owner has bad timing when using positive punishment or negative reinforcement, it can seriously harm the human-animal bond. Even well-timed positive punishment is associated with increased risk of inciting aggression.[4,5] Other possible side effects to positive punishment include: increased fearfulness, decreased capacity to learn, and suppression of desired behavior.[4,6]

An important aspect of using punishment is that each time punishment results in the desired outcome, its use is reinforced. This means that a person who resorts to punishment is likely to use punishment more often over time. For example, if yelling at a barking dog causes it to go quiet, yelling is likely to increase. If jerking on a choke chain causes a dog to stop pulling, jerking is likely to increase. Perhaps it is due to past successes that, despite current behavioral research, some trainers stick to positive punishment-based methods.

Recommending Qualified Trainers to Clients

When recommending a trainer, veterinary staff implicitly condones whatever methods the trainer uses. To ensure the practice is recommending qualified trainers, take a few minutes to interview each trainer on the list. The actual answers may vary; however, the underlying training concepts supported by the individual should be clear by the end of the interview. References to dominance or the alpha dog are red flags and that trainer should be excluded from future recommendations.

Qualified trainers can be found using the following resources:

- www.ccpdt.org/dog-owners/certified-dog-trainer-directory/
- https://apdt.com/trainer-search/
- www.karenpryoracademy.com/find-a-trainer

Trainers from these sources are accredited by nationally recognized and respected organizations, which require adherence to a code of ethics and continuing education to maintain accreditation. Regardless if trainers are chosen from the above resources, it is important to interview each before recommending to clients. In addition, follow up with clients and ask about their experience; if they or their pet are not being treated with respect, the trainer should not be recommended in the future.

To further demonstrate the importance of training, the following two cases illustrate how inappropriate training can create problems and how some dogs recommended for euthanasia can be salvaged with proper training.

The Story of Crow, A 4 Year Old MN Pit Bull Mix

Crow was adopted from a local shelter as a stray with an unknown history. His new owner, J, hired a trainer for help with general manners because Crow was raiding the cabinets for food. On his first visit, the trainer put a choke collar on Crow and "pulled him around the house." By the third session, Crow would stare fixedly at the door when the trainer entered. On the fourth visit, Crow barked and snapped at the trainer. On the fifth visit, Crow bit the trainer on the hand, breaking the skin. The trainer pulled out a Taser and the owner asked him to leave. The trainer came back a few days later, but Crow heard his voice and started frantically barking and lunging.

After that experience, Crow began staring at the front door with hard eyes anytime someone entered by that route. The family, except for their 18 year-old daughter, C, entered from the back. Crow began to stare at C every time she came in the

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home. One day, he lunged at her and scratched her leg.

A second trainer claiming to specialize in training pit bulls was hired. He arrived with two other people and three dogs to work with Crow. He asked the family's ten year-old son to massage and distract Crow. He recommended "alpha rolls" any time Crow barked or lunged.

After Crow bit J's father during a family trip, her veterinarian recommended a consult with a veterinarian whose practice is limited to behavior. Crow was tense for his initial consult. He ate treats right away, but was slow to approach the veterinarian. He showed a whale-eye (whites of eyes showing, signaling stress and escalating fear) during his physical exam. His physical exam revealed a deep pyoderma; however, he seemed otherwise healthy. Near the end of the appointment, Crow relaxed and was gently taking treats from the veterinarian's hand. He also performed cued behaviors regularly and comfortably. Use of corrective collars was immediately ended and a Freedom Harness (dual clip harness) was recommended. Crow complied with the harness fitting and continued to eat treats until the leash was clicked in place. At that point, Crow froze, stopped taking treats and suddenly lunged and bit the veterinarian in three places, following her as she backed away.

Crow's diagnosis:

1. Fear aggression toward unfamiliar people
2. Fear aggression toward C
3. Pyoderma

Crow's treatment plan:

- Implement reward system for desired behavior
- Discontinue all forms of punishment including corrective collars, yelling and "Alpha rolls"
- Increase environmental enrichment
- Keep Crow on a leash when C is home and have C toss him treats
- Systematic desensitization and counter-conditioning to specific triggers
- Separate Crow from strangers until he progresses in DS/CC
- Muzzle training
- Freedom Harness
- Adaptil®
- Anxiety medication was left as an option if clearing the pyoderma and the Adaptil® collar didn't reduce his discomfort and anxiety enough to make progress with the training plan

At Crow's first positive reinforcement-based training session, he initially avoided the trainer. When he discovered the trainer had food, he began offering "sit" repeatedly.

> By the third session using positive reinforcement, Crow strained to enter the training area, kept his ears up and forward and readily complied with known cues.

The most urgent issue became Crow's fear of the veterinary office. During his last visit to the referring veterinarian, Crow was frightened by the clinic environment, resulting in his lunging and snapping during restraint. He was muzzled, but continued to resist. Therefore, muzzle training and body handling were the focus of his training.

Results of Positive Reinforcement Training

Crow's relationship with C improved after the family implemented the above described treatment plan. Crow no longer stared intently at C and often solicited attention from her. In addition, C is no longer afraid of Crow. Crow was trained to wear a basket muzzle. He now complies calmly when the muzzle is attached, eats food through the muzzle and does not try to remove it once it is in place. After a series of mock exams during training sessions, Crow returned to his referring veterinarian for a recheck of the pyoderma. J reported that she used a copious amount of treats and the veterinary team members worked slowly around Crow. He stood still for the TPR with the technician and a PE with the veterinarian. He did not lunge, bark or growl at anyone during the exam.

The Story of Cubby, An 8 Year Old MN Pug

Cubby was referred because he bit multiple unfamiliar people. He had been placed in foster care, and it was unknown that he was worried about body handling. In one instance, the foster parent was passing him from friend to friend when he bit one of the people on the cheek. Cubby's fear of body handling also made him fractious during veterinary exams.

Cubby's treatment began with desensitization and counter-conditioning to body handling. The goal was to teach Cubby that he could earn treats by allowing hands to approach and eventually touch him if he was calm. This progressed to picking him up. He was responding well to treatment with no reported aggression for several months.

Unfortunately, an off-leash dog attacked Cubby, and although there were no apparent injuries, Cubby was taken to a veterinary office for evaluation immediately after the attack. During the visit, Cubby growled when he was lifted to an examination table, which precipitated more forceful restraint. Cubby then bit the veterinarian and technician, resulting in a recommendation of euthanasia due to aggression. The narrow snapshot of Cubby's life seen by the veterinarian may have supported that decision.

> However, the frightened and fatigued Cubby, forcefully handled at the veterinary clinic, was not representative of Cubby's overall personality and potential.

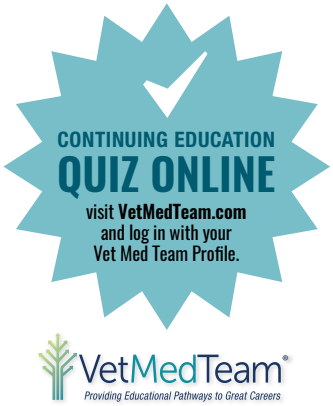
Luckily for Cubby, his rescue group was willing to allow the behavioral team to collect him from the veterinary clinic while his fate was being decided.

Upon the team's arrival, Cubby was huddled in the back corner of his cage, squinting his eyes, looking away, licking his lips and ducking his head. Normally food-motivated, Cubby would not eat, even when offered high-value treats. It took half an hour of working slowly for Cubby to begin eating. After another 15 minutes, he voluntarily allowed a leash to go on and came out of his cage.

Cubby ended up in a second foster home and was ultimately adopted by that foster. Work with his body handling issues continued and he has subsequently been to the veterinary hospital several times without incident.

Conclusion:

Training can make a significant difference in the life of a pet; that difference can be for better or for worse depending on the quality of the training. The duty to educate clients with the best information available is paramount. Clients who train their dogs using techniques from disproved theories can negatively impact both the pet's quality of life and the human-animal bond. Recommending unqualified trainers who knowingly choose to use outdated techniques can directly cause harm to the dog and may result in the dog being relinquished or euthanized. Moreover, there is risk of harm to the owner, general public and veterinary staff if the dog becomes aggressive. Working with accredited and qualified trainers allows veterinary staff to feel confident that they are using best practices, ultimately resulting in a stronger human-animal bond and a safer pet.



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Dr. Florsheim was born and raised in Dallas. After graduating with honors from Trinity University and receiving a fellowship to attend Emory University for a Ph.D in history, she decided instead to pursue her true passion – working with animals and their people. She returned to Texas where she attended Texas A&M's College of Veterinary Medicine. While at A&M, she was selected as a Geraldine R. Dodge Frontiers of Veterinary Medicine Fellow and was awarded the Skipper Stephens Award for her work to promote a better understanding of the human-animal bond. She is currently the owner of Veterinary Behavior Solutions and The Training Studio. In her spare time, Dr. Florsheim is an avid reader, loves to cook, travel and swim. She also loves to spend time with her two dogs and a gaggle of cats including Hobbes, a sizable clicker-trained orange tabby.

Cathy Painter-Rigdon, LVT, CBCC-KA

Cathy worked for 15 years as a zoo vet. tech before recently changing careers. While always interested in behavior, she became fascinated with the training done at the zoo. The discrepancy between cooperative zoo training and combative pet training led Cathy to leave the zoo world to begin working with pets. She now strives to teach mutual understanding and teamwork to as many pets and their owners as possible. As director of and trainer for The Training Studio in Carrollton, Texas, Cathy mainly works with dogs that have shown aggression towards people or other dogs.

At home, Cathy enjoys spending time with her rescue Rottweiler, Joe, her Doberman, Maddie, her two cats, Gracie and Evie and her ever patient husband Dave. Cathy would like to express her heartfelt thanks to Dave for his research and editing skills as well as his unflagging willingness to read each rendition of this article.