



## **LEAD BY EXAMPLE**

**By RSPCA South Australia**

The Lead by Example campaign has been created by RSPCA South Australia to inform dog owners about dog behaviour and learning, recommended training methods and equipment, and the risks associated with inappropriate training methods. RSPCA across Australia promotes and uses only reward based training – also known as positive reinforcement or force-free training. This approach does not cause pain or distress to the dog.

As a dog owner, you have a choice in how you train your dog and what equipment you use. However, with so much information available it can be a confusing process. RSPCA South Australia's Lead by Example campaign aims to help you to build a cooperative partnership with your dog.

Knowledge of dog behaviour, learning and training has changed. We no longer consider the 'dominance' theory approach as relevant or appropriate. Thanks to the pioneering work of leading researchers and professionals such as Karyn Pryor, Dr Ian Dunbar, Patricia McConnell PhD, Dr Sophia Yin, Dr Susan Friedman and Dr Karen Overall we now know that we can humanely and effectively train our dogs by creating positive experiences rather than by using force or punishment.

### **Dog Behaviour and Learning**

#### **Why do dogs behave the way they do?**

Dogs are social animals and prefer to be part of a group. When it comes to pet dogs, the family – which might include one or more people as well as other pets – is their group.

Despite what was previously believed, from a scientific perspective dogs do not qualify as pack animals. The term 'pack' suggests there has to be a leader who exerts dominance over other members of the pack. They are in fact social animals, and as such 'dominance theory' is irrelevant.

It was adjunct Professor David Mech who first coined the term 'alpha' wolf that was used in his book that was published in the 1960s. He has since revoked this term, and explains that it has been incorrectly used to describe relationships between domestic dogs.

Mech states, "Rather than viewing a wolf pack as a group of animals organized with a 'top dog' that fought its way to the top, or male-female pair of such aggressive wolves, science has come to understand that most wolf packs are merely family groups formed exactly the same way as human families are formed" (Mech 2010).

'Dominance theory', as described by Schenkel (1946) in his observations of captive wolves has been found to be flawed as it is based on invalid science. So, the need to dominate your dog through forceful control is unnecessary. In fact, it can have a significant negative impact on your dog's behaviour and your relationship with your dog.



## **Undesirable behaviour**

When your dog exhibits what is natural dog behaviour, you may sometimes see it as inappropriate. Barking, digging, mouthing, chewing, jumping up, pulling, growling, or even biting are all natural behaviours. Left unaddressed, such behaviours can lead to unhappy and frustrated dogs and owners.

Dogs don't understand 'good' and 'bad' behaviours. They understand 'safe' and 'not safe' behaviours. For example, your dog will not consider it safe to urinate on the floor in front of you because your body language indicates that something is wrong. However, if he urinates on the floor behind the couch, this will be 'safe' behaviour in the dog's mind.

He is not being 'bad' or 'sneaky' or 'dominant', he is being 'safe'. Your dog isn't being 'naughty' – he's just being a dog who has yet to be guided by you as to what he should do in every circumstance.

## **Communicating with your dog**

We will never know exactly how a dog feels about things. We can, however, try to understand something of what dog's feels by learning to read their body language. This is a dog's main form of communication, and we can greatly improve our interactions with dogs by spending time trying to understand their body language.

It is difficult to interpret what the whole body of the dog is telling us. The best way to begin is by observing various parts of the body for specific signs and then consider them all together. We all know that a tail tucked between a dog's legs usually means a frightened dog. However, we are misinformed if we believe that a wagging tail is always a 'happy' tail. It can also indicate arousal or aggression depending on the tail position and motion and other signs. How we interpret the movement or non-movement of each body part will give us a greater understanding of what our dogs are telling us.

Again, most people know that if a dog's ears are flat against their head then they are not comfortable or happy. However, there are many different ear positions that, in conjunction with the tail position and movement, will tell you how your dog is feeling.

Staring directly into a dog's eyes can be threatening. Brief eye contact is fine but staring is to be avoided. When a dog shows the whites of their eyes (known as 'whale' eye) they may be aroused or frightened and 'asking' for space.

When you have learnt to interpret all of the different body parts individually, you can start to combine them. The overall picture of the dog will reveal a great deal about how they are feeling. This will make life better for both you and your dog.



The Pet Professional Guild has excellent advice regarding how to read dog body language.

The following image by Lili Chin helps to show what different dog body language means.

## DOGGIE LANGUAGE

starring Boogie the Boston Terrier





## How Dogs Learn

Dogs do what feels good and what works for them. When training your dog you can use this to your advantage by making a positive association with the behaviours you want, and ignoring or redirecting the undesirable behaviours.

By managing the training environment, ignoring or redirecting inappropriate behaviour, and rewarding wanted behaviour, dogs will learn quickly. Using positive reinforcement consistently is effective because learning is strengthened through repetition – as described by the Australian Veterinary Association in their information sheet, Reward-based training.

Many decades ago the majority of dog trainers relied upon force and correction as the sole method of training. Some trainers today still use methods based on the concept of ‘dominance’ and having to be a ‘pack leader’. However, such theories have been discredited, and the associated training methods are viewed as aversive by many progressive dog trainers and professional organisations.

The Australian Veterinary Association states in their ‘Debunking Dominance in Dogs’ information sheet, “If your dog is growling, baring its teeth or snapping at you or others, it is not because they’re trying to dominate you. Often anxiety and insecurity are the primary contributors to aggressive behaviour. Dogs with medical conditions or those in pain are also more likely to be irritable or react defensively.”

When an animal continuously experiences something unpleasant, some will become unable or unwilling to avoid further negative experiences, which is often displayed as no response. When dogs are frightened and confused as to what is required of them, they may stop trying and shut down completely in order to avoid further unpleasant consequences. This is known as ‘learned helplessness’ (Lindsay SR 2000).

Some trainers mistakenly refer to this lack of response as the dog being calm and/or submissive. However, in many cases, the dog has given up due to confusion and fear.

A 2014 study published in the Journal of Veterinary Behaviour found that dogs trained using aversive techniques are far more likely to show signs of stress than those trained using positive methods. The research involved monitoring two dog training schools. One used corrections where dogs were trained using force, such as having their collar jerked. At the other school the dogs were rewarded when they performed the desired behaviour. The findings in the study suggest training methods based on positive reinforcement are less stressful and better for the dog’s welfare (Deldalle & Gaunt 2014).

Many people feel uncomfortable using force or other aversive techniques when training their dog but are not aware that alternative non-aversive methods are available. Force-free training is now being offered more widely and people are choosing to leave clubs or schools, where they or their dog are not comfortable, to enrol in force-free training.



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